evidence of a love that transcendes hunger

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by whentheteacupshatters (RUNNFROMTHEAK)

Summary

Will looks at him, eyes wide and mouth slightly agape, because the enormity of Hannibal's desire had been unsheathed and sharp with a slip in control and cracking rooms and growing gaps of cavernous holes in the floors of his mind and walls of his heart; because the enormity of Hannibal's desire sickens them both.
The awareness fractures in Will's eyes, tenuous threads of meaning understood and ignored in the same instant as he plucks them from Hannibal's still-beating heart.
Hannibal's lip curls, and he walks away.

Hannibal doesn't know how to forgive, Will doesn't know how to forget. Predictably, it doesn't go over well.

Notes

So this is my (VERY late) submission to FAD's Trope Inversion event. I've always wanted to write a post-fall fic dealing with Hannibal processing it less generously than how most fics I've read depict him, and that leading to a new iteration of the toxic tango he and Will are incapable of not embarking on. I'll list a bit more CWs below, as I didn't want toooooo many tags, and I'll list a few spoiler-y CWs in the end notes before my inspiration and references list lol. This is an inversion of Domestic Fluff --> Domestic Hell.

I want to extend the BIGGEST thanks to the FAD server as a whole, they've been so amazing to talk to and bounce ideas off of. Everyone has been so incredibly encouraging, so I want to especially thank (in no particular order), Cat, Dom, Hunter, Kaz, Jen, Nick, El, Meg, Jay, Jinxy, Aurhi, Angela, Ardie, and Millie for cheering me on, being sounding boards for a lot of brain-blocks and solutions, and helping come up with some amazing ideas that would not have been as well-developed without their input.

This is betaed by Mermaids_and_Roses and YourMinecraftBoyfriend, who put up with a lot of my slow burn bullshit, rougher drafts, several embarrassing typos, and my hatred of conventional punctuation. Parts of it have *not* been checked by them and may be edited later. I've been sitting on this fic forever and got impatient, sue me. Check their fics out!! And check out other fics from the whole trope inversion collection!!!

Hope you guys enjoy this monster that's infested my brain <3

(The house they live inlooks like this)

Translations, so you know when they come up:
-Baptême: essentially, the Quebec-French equivalent of fuck
-kazoku: family, in Japanese
-incazzato: pissed off, in Italian
-mio Odisseo: my Odysseus, in Italian
-mon chérie: my dear, in French (common pet name in Quebec)
-docteur: docter, in French
-Merhaba: hello, in Turkish
-kyōdai: brother or sibling, in Japanese
-Ikigai: reason for being, basically transcends lover, in Japanese.
-Kataomoi: unrequited love, in Japanese

CWs, in no particular order:
-Graphic violence with allusions to gore.
-Depictions and fantasies of cannibalism.
-Disturbing (seriously) thoughts by both Will and Hannibal.
-Allusions to the Fall being an act of suicidal intent, and all the implications therein.
-Hannibal's past acts of self-destruction viewed through a similar lens.
-Poorly discussed (but entirely consensual) bdsm sex, or sex with bdsm undertones.
-Hannibal/OC, which is ENTIRELY temporary, and is Not About Feelings lol.
-(See end notes for spoiler-y ones)

See the end of the work for more notes

We have not touched the stars,
nor are we forgiven, which brings us back
to the hero's shoulders and the gentleness that comes,
not from the absence of violence, but despite
the abundance of it. The lawn drowned, the sky on fire,
the gold light falling backward through the glass
of every room. I'll give you my heart to make a place
for it to happen, evidence of a love that transcends hunger.

-Richard Siken*, Snow and Dirty Rain*

Hannibal feels more than sees Will's presence, the sharp, spicy scent of his new cologne as inviting as it is a warning.

He smiles, mostly to himself, and lets his eyes close as he basks in the Italian sun.

Will sits beside him in the pew, pressing close enough to *feel* in mind more than body.

They breathe together as Will shifts to mirror him.

"All light we receive is from the past," Hannibal murmurs, content to not break the intimacy of their bubble quite yet. "Crossing over space and time to allow for life. Dying stars send us spare parts, but they died out long ago."

"All life is light but we're creatures of the dark," Will says, equal parts gentle and smug.

Hannibal's hand reaches, and Will's own meets him halfway. Their fingers intertwine for the first time, an intimacy hitherto unexplored, and Hannibal's heart gives an unfamiliar thud.

When he looks at Will, half-lidded and through his lashes, Will is looking at him. Fond and loving.

Warm, after three years of nothing but the cold.

"Does that make us dead?" Hannibal asks.

Will lifts their clasped hands to his mouth and kisses them.

His mouth is stained red when he lets go.

"It makes us God."

Hannibal's thoughts stutter, grinding to a halt as noise and touch permeates his drug-hazed awareness.

Chiyoh is gentle, clasping his shoulder and giving him a light shake. She's been the one to pull him from his head when he gets too far in fantasy to recall reality.

Madness in moderation is a medicine for the modern world, he'd told Bedelia once. Breaks in hateful reality function on a similar principle. Dissociation has become a coping mechanism for that which his reality has amounted to in the aftermath of the Great Red Dragon. Convalescencing in Canada, bitterness and landmines as every tête-à-tête in Chiyoh's absence. Will, but the antithesis of any *imago* Hannibal's love could have taken shape as.

"Leaving so soon?" Will snarks, the scar cut across his face adding a glimmer of malevolence normally only subtextually evident. A byproduct of his Becoming, one Hannibal delights and tolerates interchangeably depending on the direction of its ire.

Will is encased in shadows, has positioned himself in a corner with his back to walls like it'll protect him from Hannibal's wrath, if it were to manifest.

It's wise, Hannibal admits. The thought of manifesting metaphor into reality with a knife has, admittedly, crossed his mind: a Caesarian death to answer an unforgivable shift of normalcy (or what Hannibal has known as normalcy).

Chiyoh's mouth sets, teeth grit in a twisted expression to Will's whims. Her eyes dart from the bandages she herself had placed with regret, to the scars on Will's exposed midriff, settling on the bullet she'd left in Will in Florence.

Her hostility is well known, despite all her taciturnity and efficiency. She hadn't let Will die, true, but Hannibal sees her encroaching darkness for what it is.

Had she been on the cliff, only Will would have fallen.

It's why she's leaving, now that they are stable enough for independence and solitude. Chiyoh senses disloyalty, and like Bedelia's impulse towards weakness, she wants to crush it.

Chiyoh watches them both closely, a predator in her own right, index finger twitching as though her rifle is in hand.

Hannibal's eyes flit to Will, briefly, but the moment Will's glower turns to him, he looks away.

He imagines it is revealing, Hannibal's refusal to meet Will's eyes. For all he enjoys Chiyoh's company, he will find relief in having one less person holding witness to the cracks in his veneer, the obliteration of his insouciant disposition.

(Her touch hurts, soft hands like sulfur powder as they'd skimmed his wounds, and it's better than nothing, but better in the way being held at gunpoint is better than being held ransom without voice. It hurts, the tenderness of an overextended muscle, and it reminds him of

things lost to time. Other hands, rougher ones, with mercury promises in every unreturned brush of skin. The gentle squeezes she offers now, the parting embraces and platonic intimacies she can read his need for easily, are as wanted as they are sore.

Hypersensitive to sensation, his skin has become. Chiyoh's learned to wear gloves.

Will hasn't, but that's because he's never reached for Hannibal until their near death. Touch imbues the world with meaning, a language of unspoken intentions, and Will's absence is translated well enough.)

Even Will's observance of his state, his weakness, is akin to transgression.

He cannot forgive the origin of his wounds, nor forget the murderous consummation just before it. Salt water and ocean waves can't clean metaphysical gashes from years of absence, it would seem, though the Atlantic's roiling suffocation had made an admirable attempt.

Chiyoh shuts her eyes, takes a breath, and forces her jaw to unclench. Hannibal wonders if she pictures Will's death behind lidded eyes as well, forced to this interim of tolerance by Hannibal's design.

"Yes," she says flatly, turning towards him and away from Will. She inclines her head, and murmurs something in Japanese he can't quite pick up.

When he tilts his head in question, she sighs, smoothing her features into their normal blankness. Just as they had both learned from Lady Murasaki.

"Come, please," she says finally, and he knows the request is verbalized for the sake of Will's own irritation, Will's frustration at language barriers.

Will does so hate feeling left out of the loop, ever the accomplice, ever the victim.

Hannibal's lip curls at the thought, but he sheds his vexation in favor of following Chiyoh outside, to the porch.

It isn't snowing this time, but his sentence feels similar as he steels himself for solitude with Will once more, flickering want caught in the haze of a brewing storm as he holds vigil to a stagnant world.

"He will be your death," she informs him gravely, stiff once more. Her eyes glance at the window, as though Will might have perched behind it to listen to a conversation he wouldn't be able to understand.

Hannibal doesn't find fault in her caution, appreciates it even, but resents the conversation topic at hand.

"At a time, I would have been his."

"Instinct and foresight are different."

"You believe it was planned?"

Chiyoh's eyes narrow, glinting steel.

"Nature and nurture combine, the heart of the beast and the mind of man. Where blame is assigned matters little where your nakama *is concerned."*

Hannibal doesn't scoff, but the impulse is there, curbed by conditioned politeness not yet stripped from his ocean-birthed carcass with the rest of his person suit.

"I am not certain of the accuracy of such a label. Each time we are defined, change occurs. Uncertainty is the only certainty."

Heisenbergian uncertainty: he cannot know more than one facet of Will's mind at a time, with Will's perspective altered and shifted by mere observation. He can't tether any perception of Will he obtains to reality, for it all vaporizes into smoke and calcifies into something harder, colder, ever unknown for all Hannibal's attempts, ever behind a veil of some kind Hannibal wants to peel back and bask in.

(A part of Hannibal wants to split Will's head open enough to peer inside, to revere in the beauty of it the way Will never lets him, afraid of desire and worship of or for him, resentful of it, even. A part of Hannibal wonders if seeing thoughts and abstracts compound into flesh would help him understand why exactly they've turned out like this, why it all went wrong at every opportunity, why Will slips away from him like water from the sky. A part of Hannibal wonders if seeing would be enough, or if consumption-leaden forgiveness would beckon once more, in Bedelia's melodious whisper.)

Chiyoh's eyes aren't warm, exactly – not quite Italian sunlight cascading through stained-glass windows, not quite Will's imagined hand in his – but there's sympathy in them. Compassion. Love. Something of *family* in them, a glimmer so foreign from years without it.

"I wish your cage were kinder. "

She'd said something similar, when he'd talked her out of killing Will before his arrest.

"Better a cage in the world than a cell in the bowels of an institution."

Chiyoh's expression slips once more, and it reminds him of the first time he'd seen her after becoming an orphan, Mischa's absence a festering wound she'd been unable to hide her reaction to. She doesn't reveal herself in much, cut from porcelain not yet veined in gold, but she reveals herself in worry. In care, loathe as he is to simplify such a thing to mere words.

"Violence is all he knows, Hannibal."

"It's a currency known and preferred."

Chiyoh's eyes turn sad, and her touch is achingly gentle as she cups his cheek. His breath feels caught in his chest, trapped in the snare of sympathies, of touch.

Slave to his body, he is not. But touch is a drug he's longed for, and this is the first touch to not promise pain in years.

"*Violence is not all you are or all you know. Your beast is different. Violence did not walk you through miles of snow to tuck him in. Violence did not save his life, when I intended for him to be put down.*"

"Perhaps, my dear, you're not the best judge. You did push him off a train."

This he murmurs in Lithuanian, enclosing her hand affectionately with his larger one.

"Be wary of him," she insists.

"Trust dies but mistrust blooms," he quotes.

She says without words that he is a liar, but he knows himself and Will better now. Hannibal's mind has contextualized sympathies with circumstances and, like dear Alana, he's once again putting an emphasis on self-preservation.

He won't be caged again, by bars or emotions, by distance or time.

"I will come," she says, dropping her hand and stepping back. *"If you call."*

"But you'd prefer if I didn't."

Chiyoh gives him a small smile.

"You're kazoku, *Hannibal. I hope you don't have to."*

With one last touch, she slips back into the quiet cabin along the river.

Hannibal's eyes close, picturing sunlight and Will beside him.

The image flickers, dreamlike and unstable, as flakes of snow dust his face. It dissipates entirely as an engine starts, Chiyoh's presence vanishing from sight and scent.

(Hannibal aches, but that's no longer foreign.)

Hannibal rests his head against the porch beams, thinks of riptides and stolen gasps of air in the great blue sea, and breathes.

Will hadn't known his actions in the moments before they'd happened.

When he'd listened to Bedelia's horseshit of a lecture, irritated by her vainglorious languishing in the gray morality of 'drugged' observation with the 'threats' of 'forced' participation, he'd wanted to tear her credibility (and throat) to shreds across the lecture hall. He'd known she'd gone willingly from the start, ever curious of Hannibal's monstrosity reduced to weakness with his stitchings undone and something new reborn in a baptism of his

planned-family's blood. Will had known she tolerates cruelty quite well, stone-faced and apathetic. Will had considered her observation, her witness to Hannibal without any true action this way or that, subtle machinations and manipulative words, participation of a kind.

You play, you pay.

He'd understood her observational stance when the bullet surged through Hannibal's stomach, and Hannibal crumpled to the ground like a marionette doll with its strings cut.

(Though, were he to have separated from Hannibal on the bluff's edge, he wouldn't have offered self-important, masturbatory lectures on a fictitious self-delusion of unparalleled insight on someone that wasn't *his* to know, while immersed in jealousy for his irrelevant place holding when he'd wished to have his own role.)

Will sipped his wine and watched, picturing a broken bird in Hannibal's place when their eyes met.

To crush, or to save that faint strain of vulnerability.

Will hadn't yet known.

In truth, choice was made for him when the Dragon stabbed him and Hannibal reacted. Pack hunting is instinctive, feral human nature, and Will hadn't been *thinking* as he cut through the Dragon in the very spot Hannibal had cut through him; a recreated but decidedly *not* surgical evisceration. Will hadn't been thinking when blood spray coated his skin, glistening black and lovely in the moonlight.

Will hadn't been thinking, reaching for Hannibal, crushing them together in an inseparable embrace, positioning Hannibal's hands, granting permission for that one perfect moment.

He hadn't acted one way or another, functioning on baser instincts and Hannibal's residual influence.

Will participated eventually, when he threw them off the cliff while declaring the murder beautiful.

Because he'd looked in Hannibal's dark eyes, and felt the stirring, squirming monster inside him give a cry and begin to stretch.

The wrong thing feeling like the right thing, like the *best* thing in the world, had been too horrible a thought to live with, so he'd intended to not.

A marriage to murder traded for one with death, but Hannibal's prior planning had interfered.

Chiyoh saved them, and Hannibal hasn't looked him in the eye since the cliff.

Not that Will's been entirely forthcoming during their mutual entrapment by perilous injuries and Chiyoh's watchful eye, but it isn't as easy, talking to Hannibal.

Three years before, he'd felt thoughts drift from mind to mind, floating down the stream of his river, into the foyer of the Norman Chapel without pause.

Now, there isn't the same understanding present.

This Hannibal has a sharpness to him that his Hannibal hadn't. He delights in lofty monologues enriched in equivocation but cuts Will to the core in blunt bursts of honesty, masks his feelings behind amused indifference before staring at Will through mere inches of glass and saying things like *I gave you a child, if you recall* and *you just came to get the old scent.*

"Are you pleased?" Hannibal asks when Will joins him outside, watching Chiyoh's car fade into the landscape among blankets of snow and detritus. They are alone, at last, and Will's not sure what to do.

Will glances at Hannibal's side profile, the proud aristocratic arch of his nose, the stitches from cuts with rocks upon their landing sprinkled across his face like comets among the night sky.

Looking hurts.

He watches the white flakes descend in slow flurries instead, picturing the two of them entombed in a glass globe of pretty lies.

Both alone, with and without each other.

"This isn't what I wanted."

"What did you want, when you pitched us off the cliff?"

Will gives Hannibal a tight-lipped smile, knowing without checking his counterpart is watching.

"Not this."

"The last time snowfall offered elucidation on you, I shed my pride among the crunch of dead leaves on an unclear path. I didn't see the sky nor stars for three years. What will the consequence of this clarity be, I wonder, since death and imprisonment are temporarily out of the equation?"

Will's shoulders stiffen.

"Rebirth is painful," he says. "There are many other things left to be shed."

He leaves Hannibal alone in the cold of the snow, thinking of burning hearts and supplication offered in bouts of desperation.

(*Could he daily*, Bedelia wants to say, but it's Will's mind, and it's Will's memory, and words have personality and life to them, so he lets them all suffocate under the intimacy of his hands.

Do you–? Bedelia would ask, but every breath she draws is of a dwindling number; the dead ask no questions and tell no lies, and Dr. Du Maurier is a dead woman walking.)

Chiyoh left them passports and a portfolio of all the funds she managed to secure in the days leading up to his trial, and during his imprisonment. The portfolio also includes all the properties not linked to him, and those in more favorable locations than the bowels of southern Ontario.

Hannibal's only request had been a warmer climate, preferably with a mild winter.

Too much cold reminds him of the gaping maw of starvation, and all that he seems to lose with each flurry of snow in winter.

(Hannibal wonders what Will shall take from him next, almost exactly three years past their separation and the subsequent sleet-ridden cold front.)

Hannibal doesn't ask Will to join him, simply slides the passport across the table the next morning, and says,

"I'm departing tomorrow night."

"Where will we go?"

Hannibal feels a flush of warmth at the *we*, and violently drowns it in the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. He prays there is not a second rebirth.

"There is a place in Turkey, at the footsteps of Ancient Greece. I have property there."

"Always prepared," Will says, tracing the stitching of his scar idly, "aren't you?"

"I can never entirely prepare for or predict your actions. I simply extrapolate based on the known and my general understanding of the unknown."

When Will says nothing, jaw set, Hannibal straightens.

"For example, I did not expect your freedom to come as Dostoevsky imagined it."

"In the moment, the act felt more Epicurean."

"Am I a transcendental suffering, an enemy to be escaped only by death?"

"I wasn't escaping you," Will says. "I was marking us as equals."

"The fates were not content to cut our strings," Hannibal muses. "When shall your impatience force their hand, I wonder?"

Will takes the passport from the table, pointedly not answering.

“Michael Avci?”

“Problem?”

“I’m not Turkish, Hannibal. I don’t speak the language.”

“I do,” Hannibal says, examining the window instead of Will. “Should you accompany me, you will be introduced as a distant relative, who was born in the United States and lived there until your family died and you grew curious about other relatives.”

“Distant relative?”

(*You’re family, Will*. This, of course, isn’t exactly as Hannibal had meant it.)

“Cousin of some variety,” Hannibal waves him off, pushing the chair back into the table and placing his cup of cold coffee in the sink to be washed. “The details don’t entirely matter, as few will get close enough to ask. Simply a precaution.”

“Won’t they think it strange we don’t look alike?”

“Not all cousins share the same genetics. The lottery ball rarely produces the same number twice, and so the genetic combinations vary with every offspring produced.”

“Wouldn’t it have been simpler to go with a different story?”

Hannibal’s lips curl, and he can feel Will’s eyes focus on him as he fills the sink with soap and warm water.

“Why Will, whatever do you mean?”

Hannibal’s skin crawls, where Will’s eyes glower at. It’s a delightfully uncomfortable sensation.

“Two middle aged men in an airport are less suspicious if they’re married. Statistically speaking.”

“I’m aware.”

“So why family?”

Why *distant* family, Will means to ask.

“Because,” Hannibal says reasonably, taking the sponge to the coffee cup roughly. “Married couples have intimacies to them, expectations of behavior, roles to perform.”

“You think I can’t?”

“I think you could,” Hannibal asserts. “But I don’t know that you would. We are dead, Will. No one has found us, and soon they will stop looking altogether. Are you content with what

the fates have decided?”

Will doesn’t answer, lost in thought looking at the darkening winter sky.

Hannibal hadn’t expected him to.

(Later, as they leave, he’ll look at the coffee cup on the drying rack, and think of porcelain teacups caught in *ouroboros.* He’ll picture dropping the plain white ceramic mug on the ground, he’ll picture the moment of fragmentation, bits and pieces scattering across the hardwood floors, and he’ll picture waiting for it to repair itself.

It never does, Hannibal has learned. Not with time and not with forgiveness.

There can be no creation with ceaseless destruction. The teacup, whether made of porcelain or ceramic, will always shatter, and it will never gather itself back together again.

In reality, he doesn’t drop the cup. He sets it gently in a cupboard, alone, and knows it will remain so as time marches forward.

Shattered or not, it remains alone.

Hannibal can understand such a thing.)

They make it through security without a hitch, Hannibal smiles brilliantly at every security officer, and politely flirts with flight attendants as they’re seated in first class.

Will resents his comfort, his ease in this transition, but his resentment is the silent kind.

(Clicks of disapproval when admiring eyes wander over Hannibal's musculature, glares when numbers are offered, the usual.

Peacocking when Interpol's got to be on high alert...fucking Hannibal Lecter.)

No sense airing dirty laundry where others can hear. Will isn’t certain he’s ready to kill again, this soon.

They land in Turkey without fanfare, to the fall of rain rather than snow (which, given Will’s experiences with Hannibal, doesn’t bode well for him) and Hannibal escorts them to a Rolls Royce that looks brand new.

“No,” Will says, eyes a bit wide.

Hannibal tosses him the keys with a smirk, and says, not without bite,

“Try not to kill us.”

Will, who had not been thinking of such a thing until Hannibal mentioned it, weighs the cons of being predictable against the merits of shutting Hannibal up. And though Will's always been a firm atheist, he can't deny the thought of wandering the layers of Hell with Hannibal's smug, omnipotent ass – should Hell exist – would be much worse than any satisfaction Hannibal may derive from perceived obedience.

Temporary obedience.

Things can always change.

"No promises," Will says, picturing Hannibal drowning deep in the Atlantic, hair mussed by salt water and calm countenance strangled by death. It's as comforting as it is disturbing: beauty and madness, as his entire life has been thus far.

Will does not give into the urge, following Hannibal's instructions with minimal protests as they wind through the streets of *Çanakkale* smoothly. He's even magnanimous enough to listen as Hannibal recites bits of history and mythology at certain locations, tuning in and out to the flow of the road.

"Çanakkale has seen the rise and ruin of empires, under different names and different rulers," Hannibal says, not without that reverant sort of awe old world beauty has always brought to his voice. "It saw the destruction of Troy and the foundations of Ancient Rome and Macedonia. It is a place of humanity, unfiltered and bloody."

"Troy was destroyed and rebuilt nine times," Will says, recalling the detail amidst a whirlwind study session of the Trojan War after Hannibal's offer to run away. "Didn't they ever get tired?"

"The preservation of beauty and history is salient, to many. Perhaps they believed it would help, repairing damages rather than giving in to entropy."

"Did it help?" Will asks.

Hannibal's knuckles whiten around the handle of the door, but he does not answer Will. They are not talking about Troy.

"Sometimes," Hannibal says after a moment, soft in that way Will hates him for, "the laws of man and God alone are not enough to curb the urge to spin gold from threads of splintered straw. Sometimes, one hopes that the destruction can lead to beauty, even in the aftermath of it all."

(*Occasionally I drop a teacup to shatter on the floor on purpose,* Hannibal said so long ago, across from Will in his office, both of them wet-eyed and mournful. *I'm not satisfied when it doesn't gather itself up again.*)

(*I gave you a rare gift,* Hannibal had said, raw and unforgivably human in his pain and betrayal, *but you didn't want it.*)

When Will looks at Hannibal, his head is bowed, as though in prayer. He wonders if Hannibal is hiding his face from God the way he hadn't feasting on an ortolan.

Will says nothing, unwilling to speak past the bundled knot in his throat.

Hannibal directs him out of the city, through the sprawling cosmopolitan mess of European civilization, and Will keeps driving.

Hannibal's, or rather, Anarbek Aydem's property is a modernized villa sprawled across the landscape, surrounded by the silence of trees and a few miles from the waters of the Dardanelles Strait. It's three floors, with four bedrooms, five bathrooms, a pool, and enough isolation to protect their anonymity, without being abnormal.

It is, admittedly, rather different from Hannibal's typical style. He'd had his bedroom and the kitchen redesigned in a manner similar to that of his Baltimore home, but the rest he'd left a bright, crisp white with shining rays of yellowed light. From the driveway, a memory of something Will had said, years before, materializes: *Sometimes at night I leave the lights on in my little house, and walk across the flat fields. When I look back from a distance, the house is like a boat on the sea. It's really the only time I feel safe.*

As Hannibal shuts the car door behind him, suitcase full of medical supplies and spare clothes in hand, the house looks like a boat over familiar waters: it looks safe.

It hadn't been his intention, this small similarity, but there it sits.

Hannibal sets his jaw, and strides forward with the key in hand, not bothering to check if Will is following. He could run, should he choose. Could turn them both in, could play the victim, drug himself as Bedelia had, or plead for mercy as a reward for Hannibal's imprisonment as before.

It matters little what Will does, Hannibal tells himself. The choice is already made, the box already opened, wavelengths collapsed into one, this universe decided from others, even if Hannibal himself has not yet peeked inside the box to see what decision has been reached, if he is to be captured or alive. Time will march forward regardless, an indifferent observer without malice or mercy.

(They won't take him alive this time, Hannibal knows. He wouldn't let them even if they tried. He hopes Will watches it, should that happen. He hopes Will watches him die, and he hopes Will *burns* with indignation and silent regrets before shutting himself back into the person-suit of a husband with a plain wife and the FBI man who caught the Chesapeake Ripper.)

(If he tells it to himself enough, maybe he'll believe it, maybe this complete and utter lapse in control will be less hateful, maybe looking at Will and seeing scattered shards of different

futures he'd tried to build will hurt less. If he repeats it enough, accepts it, then the inevitable betrayal won't hurt as much as it always has. Cliff dives and goodbyes.)

Hannibal feels a wave of calm wash over him as he enters the kitchen and finds everything built to his instructions. It's larger than the one he'd found a home and his ruin in, back in Baltimore, but identical in every other way. Stained black cupboards open to stainless steel pots and pans and a stocked pantry, with lights shining down on the sleek white counter beneath it. The island in the center of the kitchen has a commercial-style cook top, and he finds all the equipment he'd requested be there to his exact specifications.

Hannibal smiles, to himself, as he opens the fridge door and thinks about what to cook after so long without lifting a pan.

This, of course, is precisely when Will chooses to shut the front door behind him, flouncing into the kitchen with all the fury of a man twice bitten and no longer shy (if he had, in fact, ever been such a thing).

"What the *hell* are you playing at? Did you have to purchase the biggest fucking house in the country?"

"Certainly not," Hannibal says, taking out the necessary ingredients to begin a vegetable broth for his *Ezogelin Çorbası* . He debates for a moment adding some kind of meat to it, but decides against it. Best to keep the recipe as it is, given that he's only made it once before. "While I don't deny it is among the better houses in Çanakkale, it is certainly not unusually extravagant, nor indicative of unreasonable or unheard of affluence. I've owned this property for at least a decade, and if the FBI did not locate and seize it during my imprisonment, they're unlikely to do so now."

"It's *excessive*," Will spits, as though the very word is tawdry.

"I don't delight in self-inflicted misery," Hannibal says, breezing past Will to his stove top. "I imagine you'll learn to tolerate this, should we live much longer, and should you stay."

"I don't have anywhere else to go."

Where else wouldn't you go? Hannibal thinks, smarting.

"Pick a bedroom then," Hannibal dismisses as his broth begins to simmer. "Mine is on the third floor, but there are rooms on the second floor should the desire for separation bite at your heels. Despite any renewed conjoinings."

Will glares at him.

"Fine."

Hannibal doesn't track the scent of Will as it leaves the air, nor the stomping footsteps as they echo the staircase. He doesn't think about teacups and time, and how everything had gone from so beautiful to so ugly rapidly. He doesn't think of the fluctuations of his own emotions, and how he no longer knows how to react to Will, how to be with him or around him when

all of it carries an acrimonious nuance that can't help but seep to the surface in every discussion, with every point of contact.

Hannibal doesn't think of those things, because he is more in control of his mind than that. He's sequestered Will's influence, left it saturating the alkaline-scented kitchen in Baltimore, left it choking on Abigail's wet dying breath, left it agonizing over Hannibal's pain and its own.

Hannibal cooks, because he isn't willing to offer Will retribution or reckonings carved in his flesh. Imprisonment isn't viable, and his pain exists in a liminal space outside his frame of reference. It is something that happens, it is not something felt.

Hannibal cooks, because he won't offer vulnerability, won't offer weakness, won't offer apologies for things long forgiven.

Hannibal cooks, because what else is he meant to do in this nonsensical existence the ocean spat him out into?

It's easy to feel anger when he isn't focused on the sprawling grip of loss, Will thinks as he climbs the stairs.

Even as Hannibal lay prone on the floor, bullet wound oozing blood to fuse with the spilled wine, there had been an intimacy between them. Hannibal's unimpressed stare, prolonged as he clutched his abdomen, and Will's unflappable mask as he sipped his unmarred wine glass. An amused sort of eye contact, both curious what would become of them, as individuals and as a unit.

Even in the interim between *after Hannibal* and a reunion ordained by the Great Red Dragon, there had been an intimacy preserved in pilfered belongings locked in his and Molly's shared attic, in letters opened and never burned, in memories preserved among the fish in the stream, in the realm of his unconscious, when he felt distant enough for some attempt at honesty.

There isn't that present, right now. Will had woken first, rocked to awareness by the choppy waves of the Atlantic as Chiyoh steered them North, and hadn't yet felt its absence. It'd taken weeks for the scattered numbness to take root in his thoughts as something understood and known, for Hannibal to wake and refuse Will eye contact.

Some part of him had splintered at the refusal. Bitterness under his skin surfacing reactively, instinctively, and the more Hannibal withdrew the more he lashed out until Hannibal's verbal jabs became an eventual acknowledgement.

There had been days Chiyoh locked them in separate rooms, tired of their bickering and wary of Will managing to find a knife. Chiyoh's protectiveness hadn't made being with Hannibal

any easier, loath as she was to spare Will oversight for even a moment with Hannibal not yet strong enough to defend himself.

It'd been a miracle she'd left at all. One Will finds himself grateful for, with all the memories she's given him.

Train tracks and long walks and bullets in his shoulder.

Chiyoh had spared him the speech about breaking Hannibal's heart, but only because Will's already broken it (if Bedelia's to be believed). Shattered it, possibly. Danced over its ashes and left Hannibal to wither and starve in the depths of the BSHCI.

Chiyoh *hadn't* spared him the painful consequences; Will's at least sixty percent sure she'd left the stitches messy enough that his scars would be uglier than medically necessary, and he's almost *certain* he hadn't imagined the weakness of the painkillers when Chiyoh had allowed him consciousness.

He picks the room across from Hannibal's out of spite, knowing immediately which one is Hannibal's by door alone.

"*Through the pale door, a hideous throng rush out forever, and laugh—but smile no more*," Will quotes to himself, snorting at the image of Bedelia being part of the aforementioned *hideous throng* to rush from the depths of Hannibal's inner sanctum.

It's fitting, though.

Dramatic bastard.

The room he selects is much more sedate, lacking the ostentatious opulence that is Hannibal's preference and decorated with serene shades of blue and green. Colors meant to be calming for the mind.

He wonders if that had been Chiyoh's idea or Hannibal's; considering the clothing in his dresser they'd both known which room he'd pick.

His money is on Chiyoh, she *would* find a subtle way to remind him exactly how unstable she found him to be with something as simple as paint.

Will gives a humorless laugh. Living on the same plane of existence as Hannibal requires compromise and patience, the patience to not fly off the handle at every provocation offered as half of them will be tests because Cannibals Have Trust Issues Too, apparently.

(Not unwarranted, so to speak. Not without a root cause, like all of Will's own. Their cruelty is reciprocal and reactive. They both have their reasons for it, now.)

Will is short on compromises and shorter on patience, and it feels like his revival from the ocean water has imbued him with some frantic, ticking agitation beneath his skin, scratching desperately to be let out.

He'd tried to kill them both, and they'd survived.

Despite Hannibal's bullet wound and near sepsis, despite the tissue damage from multiple *fucking* stab wounds, including one in the shoulder he'd *already* seriously injured before – thank you *so much* Dolarhyde, Crawford, and the kid who'd killed his girlfriend that Will had failed to shoot in New Orleans – despite Will's oscillating desires for death and life, despite Hannibal's *appetite*, they've lived, and they haven't killed each other yet, and it doesn't make *sense* to him.

None of this does.

To want to kill Hannibal is not a new urge, it's one of the most central sensations he uses to ground himself when lost in the minds of other killers. It's what he'd used to reinforce forts between who *Hannibal* had been and who *Will* had wanted to be. Hating Hannibal is irrevocably intertwined with the creature he's Become, and it hadn't been until Bedelia opened her mouth to spout cold statements that didn't *sound* or *feel* like lies that Will had considered alternative anchors, alternative interpretations.

Tasteless, he'd thought of Bedelia's role as Hannibal's wife, as Hannibal's lover, as someone who believed herself to hold singular insight into the man behind the pomp and the suits.

Could he daily… and it's obvious.

Do you… and the answer is less so. Lost in language exchange, diffused somewhere in between the process of comprehending and attempts to verbalize.

Ache like a bruise or ache like bloodshed? Ache like the sharp pain of a bullet or that of ground-impact from a height?

All of them and none of them describe how he feels.

It's difficult when he doesn't entirely know *this* Hannibal anymore, hasn't had a chance to contextualize his feelings without the veil between them, to quantify said feelings with a three-year buffer and ready-made family meant to insulate them, reduce them, destroy them.

This Hannibal, more than anything else, is revealing, dolorously so. He looks past Will to hurt him, says what he feels with perfect knowledge of his impact. There is little refinement, elegance, or posturing, for all the pretension and obfuscation he imbues his soliloquies with; Hannibal is how Hannibal is, weaponizing honesty and truth as much as half-lies and deceit.

Will showers, in hopes of washing the memories from his mind, massaging them out from the wet tissue folds and grooves of his gyri and sulci like knots in muscle, extracting them from his long term memory.

It doesn't work, he knows it as he dresses and feels every ache and pain their fall gifted him, as he sees the scars Hannibal has done unto him.

Will looks in the mirror, and sees Hannibal staring back at him.

With a sigh, he walks downstairs to face his companion in this afterlife, and likely each one after it.

Hannibal seats them in the dining room, the darker oak and familiar paintings soothing for both of them. It reminds him of before everything went wrong, before life became a dance between porcelain fragments.

Will to his left, and himself at the head of the table. The right is a seat of trust, and across is a seat of partnership.

Neither is befitting of the creature Will has become, one of noxious vapors and glass shards cutting both their throats.

Hannibal doesn't see a point in pretending, here.

He's been stripped bare of every other facet of his being by Will. Lying for feigned peace that would never last is as pointless as journals of sprawling Lorentz reactions and attempts at relativity. He knows the inevitability of entropy and decay now.

"*Ezogelin Çorbası* and winter salad with a citrus vinaigrette."

Will takes a fork to the salad first, prodding at the ripe pomegranates and their insidious seeds.

"Are you offering six pomegranate seeds, Hannibal?"

"Nothing quite so dire," Hannibal says, relishing in the crunch of the persimmon melding with the hint of mint. "I know well enough that no cage should hold you, Underworld or other."

"Are they for you, then?"

"Were three years insufficient?" Hannibal says, delighting in the minute *flinch* Will's shoulders give before the other can suppress it beneath well-earned confidence.

"Unrequested penance in a gilded cage is hardly a gift, Hannibal."

"My gifts aren't often well-wanted nor received where you're concerned, Will."

"Persephone was stolen with a devil's bargain, her own father offering her to Hades as a favor."

"In one version," Hannibal counters, watching Will bite into the pomegranate. "In others, she ventured there out of compassion for the dead. Others still state she came willingly at Hades' behest."

"Did she love him?"

“Love is not always an answer to the question. I like to think she could, that she did.”

“Did Patroclus love Achilles, in the end?”

Hannibal feels his countenance slip.

“Not enough to live.”

“He cared for others. Achilles cared only for him.”

“Love is inherently selfish,” Hannibal murmurs. “Flesh calls to flesh, emotion to emotion. It is an irreversible awareness.”

“Burning hearts and stabs of hunger,” Will says, licking citrus dressing and whiskey droplets from his lips. He lifts the spoon from beside his bowl of soup, and glances at Hannibal.

Hannibal isn’t quick enough to glance away, ever the victim of impulse and gravity.

“Why long spoons?”

“*He who sups with the Devil should have a long spoon*.”

Will smirks.

“Chilton said something similar.”

“Before you had him eviscerated?”

“Before the Dragon changed him.”

“Cruelty by proxy,” Hannibal muses, tracing his own scars from Will’s initial reckonings. “You *would* favor that.”

“Does that mean the spoon is for you?”

“For both of us, I think. *We are each our own devil, and we make this world our hell.* ”

“What layer of the inferno are we in?”

“Now?” Hannibal looks away. “We are in many places. Purgatory has passed behind us, we have delved deeper. The burning blood has lapped at our feet, baptizing us in this new life. What is before us is *Caina* , and this suspended existence in the river Cocytus.”

“Time has been suspended from the moment you killed Abigail,” Will admits. “I spent three years playing catch up with the facts and variables of human existence.”

“Do you still visit your stream?”

Will hides his face from God beneath a veil of disheveled curls.

“It’s been tainted. Blood seeped into it, and every rush sounds like the entrance of more from a wound I can’t close. There is no quiet to be found. You ensured that much.”

Hannibal closes his eyes, unable and unwilling to stop the thrum of satisfaction at that confirmation.

“You never said what it is you want, Will.”

“Wants and desires are separate entities from my reality.”

“Only because you deem it so,” Hannibal says. “You wanted my death and my life before. You wanted your end and your beginning. Where do your desires orient here?”

Will sighs.

“I’m vague on those details.”

“Never can true reconcilement grow where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep,” remarks Hannibal, watching Will’s cheeks flush with anger. “Would reconcilement have come with my death?”

Will is quiet; the silence of an empty grave.

No more words are exchanged that night.

Back when Will had fantasized about running away with Hannibal, between an offer of a polite goodbye and the death of their daughter, it had always been companionable (intimate, even).

Friendly banter over gourmet meals cooked by Hannibal, careful cleanings of evidence and bodies from their shared kills, Hannibal’s earnest joy in sharing history and beauty with Will all across Europe.

After, in the flickering pocket of unreality between the kitchen and waking up, he’d dreamed of Hannibal taking Will and Abigail dancing, dipping both of them until they laughed, with all the grace and poise Hannibal did everything with.

(Once, on a night when he’d taken enough pills and drank enough whiskey to not care about morality and madness, he’d dreamed of Hannibal’s lips over his in the kitchen, wondering at the way salt and copper would have tasted between their hungry mouths.)

It’d never been this stilted construction of politeness Hannibal maintains. It’s never been shared chores and a whole house of separation.

At arm’s length, despite sleeping one door away.

Separated by the veil of Dr. Lecter, even at dinner.

Will complies with the pretend-play, to some extent. He keeps barbed comments spread throughout the day so as to not instigate a real fight. Lets Hannibal's pointed looks go unprovoked, exhausted of anger and still burning, burning in a way the great Atlantic couldn't put out.

(So used to drowning that fire is unfamiliar, because he's spent his whole life immersed in the seas of others, and now he wants to burn himself into Hannibal like a brand.)

Don't you ache for me? He wants to demand of Hannibal's unshakable mask, the cracks filled in so well Will can only see them in shifting beams of light, in rare moments where the right, wrong word hits his monster's heart too deep to hide. Surgical precision in pain and mutually assured self-destruction. *Aren't you nourished, yet?*

But Will knows emotions, knows the delicate brush of affection against his barriers, knows the curdled corpse of Hannibal's trust masking Will's better sense, knows the pinprick warning of Hannibal's anger before the knife breaks skin, knows the static-shock of Hannibal's fear as well as he knows his own. He knows Hannibal in his entirety, atoms to entrails, but what he feels now, two feet apart, is different.

Hannibal grants him temporary access, a monitored entrance to the footsteps of his sanctum sanctorum, but it's just another lure, a mousetrap of knowledge, because Will's insight *hurts*.

Fluttering eyelids reveal the virulent haze of anger, the depths of which Will has never felt from Hannibal, even when the man's knife had found a home in Will's belly with an intent to separate and punish. The downward quirk of pouted lips allows Will to understand betrayal, the betrayals he's done unto Hannibal as was done unto him. To *feel* the effects of his violent reciprocity is an uncomfortable understanding; an intimacy like a stab wound, which is exactly what Will's scar had been an attempt at, *intimacy*, so invasive that Will wouldn't be able to erase it no matter how many betrayals forced a parting between them: no matter how it had felt the moment of impact, cast aside like he was nothing, falling on kitchen tile in a wasteful heap.

It's not sustainable, this resentment, this rage they both share. The dwindling memories of better times, the dwelling hope of better things.

Will wants to take it all back, and wants death to have stuck.

But he doesn't *get* what he wants. Not where they are concerned. He'd given them two options – live or die – and Hannibal had managed to make a third one called purgatory where they both sit and wait and balance each other on scales of worth, measuring the rupture severance would cause.

He wants Will forever and wants Will to evaporate, to return to the void and leave him unchanged and as fulfilled as he'd been before Will made his loneliness self-evident.

He wants Will by his side and he wants Will under his scalpel on an operating table or kitchen counter. He wants to separate, and he wants to stitch them together like anglerfish

mates sharing blood and body and soul and mind.

(Will sees Abigail, sometimes. A vestige of grief just out of sight, smoke and choking vapors shaped like a daughter. She always vanishes before he can say a word.)

Are you pleased? Hannibal asks over Randall Tier's corpse, Hannibal asks, watching Chiyoh leave them alone in the dead of winter, as time dilates back and forth in pendulum swings.

The question echoes throughout the forest like a gunshot, like the gush of blood weeping from knife wound affections.

Pleasure is foreign, independent of pain.

For the first time in months, he thinks of Molly, thinks of her soft hands and delicate scents (vanilla and figs from her shampoo and perfume, tangled with his own aftershave and the musk of their dogs, and yet he'd missed pomegranates and amber, fireplace smoke and well-disguised copper notes Will had to earn the knowledge of, he'd missed the best worst thing to happen to him, even with the people he should've been grateful for). Will thinks of the way she wouldn't try and turn the lights on during sex, the way she'd be soft with him and firm with him, the way he'd needed so desperately when he'd severed Hannibal from him like a fucking artery.

(Like Abigail's *fucking* neck, leaking all over her father's kitchen thrice. Like Abigail's slim neck still throbbing with life as Hannibal's broken eyes shatter in tune with the beats of their dying hearts; Iphigenia replacing the deer as preordained.)

Molly's love hadn't been pleasant. It'd been too warm, too soft, too much of what he should want if he were even remotely normal or good or sweet the way he'd convinced her he was. It'd chafed against his rawness, like a bow string against untreated vocal chords – *it's our song,* he'd told Hannibal – but he'd endured because that'd been what the man he'd wanted to be would have chosen, and Will has always wanted to be *good* more than anything else, more than infernal desires or designs, more than safety or comfort or self-preservation.

"My," Bedelia says reproachingly, perched on the covers of his bed with her legs crossed elegantly. "Don't *you* look domesticated."

"Shut up," he tells her, smoothing the wrinkles of Hannibal's dress shirt with an iron. It'd been this or dishes, and he hadn't felt up to dealing with possible teacup conversations this week. Or ever, in fact. Too bad there's no textbook for this sort of thing: *Modern Murderer's Manual to Domesticity*, or something.

"Will silence bring you peace?"

"Yours might."

Bedelia smirks.

"There's intimacy in silence, a comfort in it. The blurring of selves and thoughts with predictions. Is this silence intimate?"

“As intimate as your death will be,” Will snaps.

“Hannibal gave you the keys and left the country, yet Mr. Crawford never entered his home. Hannibal still lives.”

“And your parts linger behind a locked door, unwanted and unmourned.”

“My parts served their purpose,” Bedelia says, pointedly. Her outfit shifts into a dazzling gown cut in black and gold, one he’d seen pictures of after sending Hannibal away. “Yours have become vestigial, languishing in disuse and atrophy.”

“I’m sure you *relished* your wifely duties,” he hisses.

She looks amused, and Will wishes he could kill her. He hasn’t had the opportunity to enact his threat spoken like a promise, but he fully intends to do so.

“The dark is soft, when it is required. Hot and comforting, even. Danger lurks, but that is the thrill of Hannibal for you. We’ve both been his bride, Mr. Graham. I simply accepted the ring and reaped rewards from it while I journeyed through the inferno.”

(*You expect us to believe that you somehow lost yourself in the* ***hot darkness*** *of Hannibal Lecter’s mind?* Will recalls himself saying, back when he’d found a play-wife and trail of corpses where he and Abigail should have been, had things been different. A whore draped in pearls, in Hannibal’s bed and at Hannibal’s table, undeserving, and unable to fully see for all that she claimed to.)

“I’m not Bluebeard’s wife.”

“No,” Bedelia agrees. “The Last Wife wasn’t halted by human sympathies. Her survival wasn’t contingent on connection and love, and she never denied herself.”

“I don’t ache for him.”

Bedelia leans closer, standing from the bed as her dress flutters to the ground like puddles of ink-bottle darkness. She looks down on him the way he had looked down on her, once.

“I don’t believe you.”

Hannibal tries to reconstruct Will’s thinking on the edge of the bluff, when he’s locked in a room Will can’t open. When his Memory Palace shutters close and leave him caught in rapture and agony.

He tells himself he’s in control but it’s Will’s voice, trembling with ashes of ecstasy. His hand shakes and it’s Will’s, gripping Hannibal’s shoulder, pulling at Hannibal’s hip, tugging at Hannibal to embrace him in turn. His mouth is wet, and it’s black in the moonlight.

He looks in eyes – his, Will's – sees the sublime madness mutually exchanged. What he'd thought had been a mutual exchange - in the moment - all feelings and blurring outlines between them in a haze of nature's most savage delights: life and death and absolute control.

Equals at long last, in pain and inflicted suffering, in imprisonment and offered freedoms.

The cosmic scales are balanced, the heart and minds of both at ease for the first time since Hannibal scented fevered sweetness and kept it to himself.

Hannibal watches the curious whisper of an end to their zero-sum madness glimmer in Will's mind, sees himself and his desires betrayed by wandering eyes and greedy hands, a rabbit heartbeat before the grandiosity of this villainous thing he's coaxed from mundanity once more. He's caught in rapture, as the sky threatens to fall. Unaware.

On the bluff, he'd seen Abigail in the rushing ocean waves and the soundscape of deer and other creatures treading through underbrush and fallen leaves. He'd seen Mischa in the swaying rows of flowers, the gentle lights twinkling above them in the night sky.

He'd seen Will, *his* Will. The Will he'd bandaged the hands of and burned his life away with.

(The thought of self-immolation, murder-suicide, is evident only in retrospect.)

Hannibal watches his mouth hover near Will's – damning in intent – just out of reach as he awaits dismissal or invitation, as he lets Will tell him what this is, what they are, what union this is to be, and Will's eyes are clearer than they've ever been, brighter than they've ever been, when he says *it's beautiful* and pulls Hannibal as close as they can be without some type of fusion, without a surgical joining that's already present on a metaphysical level.

Hannibal's eyes are closed as Will tips them off the bluff; too close to the sun for wax repairs of teacups or constructed wings to hold.

The Fall – the original sin of this life, the fall of man, the source of their damnation in the patterns of Genesis – lands him in his kitchen, with Will's mouth near his own, two breaths apart, a linoleum knife embedded in his stomach, and hands clutching at Hannibal like anything can hold them together ever again.

I gave you a rare gift, Hannibal hears himself say, in splintering shards of humanity as he trembles. *But you didn't want it.*

He doesn't yet see the resolve on Will's face to kill him, to follow him and end him the way Will had resolved to sometime in Italy, but he sees forgiveness like a festering tumor, taking root and demanding attention.

As Will thinks he's slipping away, as Hannibal looks down on him with all niceties stripped from his persona, Hannibal feels Will's forgiveness like another blow; the chokehold Jack hadn't managed to maintain.

(He kills Abigail in retaliation, for changing him and knowing him. He kills Abigail because she wants freedom and has already tried it herself, because he loves her and they don't

deserve her, because he wants Will to hurt as he hurts, because Will cares little for teacups or entropy when self-deception is an option to live. He kills Abigail because he doesn't know how to love, and Will never would've taught him how to be gentle.

He kills and doesn't delight.

He'll never admit it.)

And he falls back from there, in between unspooling threads of time and space as his mind shifts with mood, to Randall Tier and *she was a slim and delicate pig*, to honeypot smiles and Matthew Brown, to Will walking into Hannibal's office alive like something out of scripture amidst a crime scene and Jack's suspicions, and every moment in between.

It's love, Hannibal's learned over the years. He'd decried it in Europe, tried to shed it like rotting, necrotic tissue as his environment changed, but it was ever-present when he and Bedelia had sex, no matter which end of the penetration he was on. It was present when chocolate curls and an inviting smile reminded him of tasteless thoughts, and warmth in a life of loneliness. It was present with every tremble of his hand, building an altar of skinned flesh in a place of worship.

Hannibal hadn't been able to shed it, for all his talk of freedom and self-preservation and living.

Love scalds his tissues now, cloying and familiar where it stitches itself into him. He wonders, watching a teacup crash to the ground and repair in a cyclical impossibility of time, if it would be surgical in this life – forgiveness at scalpel's point.

If Will would take the gun from his forehead or go for the trigger. If Will would use his hands, as he'd promised.

Hannibal forces the thoughts away, forces sheets of snow to descend on his unruly mind as it dances away from his whims, and pretends there isn't an anxiety to the action, an air not unlike desperation with his very solace placing itself out of his control.

Hannibal blanks himself, smooths every broken crevice and porous escape for emotion or revelations, and shows Will his tablet without a word.

"Congratulations," he says. "We are officially dead."

Will's eyes scan the article rapidly, frown growing more pronounced the further down he gets.

"Till Death Do Us Part: the Murder Husbands' Final Escape!", Freddie Lounds had titled the article.

Truthfully, he finds this karmic, Will's annoyance. Had he killed her, this article and many others would not have been penned.

Hannibal briefly debates the aesthetics of printing the article and framing it in the hall of his bedroom, before deciding against it. It would be out of place, beside *Dante and Virgil*. A bit

too trite for his own preferences.

“Jack won’t believe it just because the FBI called off the search.”

“We don’t need him to. He is severely limited by the demands of his job. Should news of his retirement arise, we will take precautions.”

“You've underestimated him before,” Will reminds him pointedly, stabbing the fish Hannibal had prepared for lunch with a bit more aggression than necessarily required, “He almost killed you.”

Hannibal had basked in pain, when Jack Crawford beat him into the ground. The sting of blood and ache of mortal wounds had been grounding, a reality in shifting shades of past and present. He’d craved it, the loss of control. Craved something outside his own betrayal and Abigail’s memory. Something other than emotions he wouldn’t allow himself to be privy to and Will’s keen absence.

When Will rests the tablet between them, Hannibal offers eye contact.

“I allowed it.”

Will swallows roughly, brow furrowed.

“*Why?*”

“It is on the verge of death, and in the greatest suffering where true beauty and insight comes. Sirens called to man with their beauty, but the true allure lay in the apple-sweet knowledge they sang. One doesn’t fear the sharpness of rocks when such a temptation is dangled in front of them.”

“You knew I was coming.”

Hannibal nods.

“You saw me, in the halls of the dead.”

Another nod.

“You would’ve allowed Jack to take your life, knowing I was coming to see you?”

“I was curious if it would hurt,” Hannibal says. “I learned quickly that none can cut so deep as you, dear Will.”

“You’re one to talk,” Will bites.

“Vivesectomies and murders by proxy,” Hannibal agrees. “But you tried to kill us.”

“I deliberated,” Will says. “Left our fate to the oceans.”

“You demand agency and absolve yourself of responsibility. Intent matters, Will, in crimes of all kinds.”

“It was an act of mercy.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal drawls, deliberately slow as he locks himself behind glass with pain on display, “You should’ve reserved your mercy for yourself.”

Mercy is an interesting term for this sickness Hannibal feels well up, for the shudders in his foyer’s walls, for the cracks and unwinding seams he repairs almost daily when he can lock his bedroom door and pretend it can save him from the fate love assigns him.

“Like you did?” Will hisses.

Hannibal steps closer, until his form overshadows Will’s. He hears Will’s breath catch as Hannibal’s fingers skim over the scar he’d left in Will’s belly.

“If I had mercy for myself,” he murmurs, wet words wretchedly intimate against the shell of Will’s ear, “I would have killed you in my kitchen, and not left you my heart in Palermo.”

Will shivers, and when Hannibal pulls back, his eyes are dark.

“Who was the valentine?”

“Potential,” Hannibal says. *Briseis*, he thinks, but willing and eager to help him *untwist*.

“What was his crime?”

Not being you, Hannibal doesn't say.

They’re both pretending Will doesn’t know, staring into each other's eyes like so many times before.

It’s just another lie between them, and with so many, Hannibal can’t be pressed to rectify it.

(Will had to have known when he’d sent Hannibal away, when he’d bled out on the slaughterhouse floor Hannibal had made of betrayal and love, when Hannibal had said *all Greeks would die* and *we could leave now*.

It’s a lie persisting through time, permeating their bond in the depths of Hannibal’s mind and dreams. It’s a lie that allows Hannibal some semblance of self-respect, and a lie that allows Will to demonize Hannibal as he needs to. It’s a lie that hurts as every truth between them has.)

Will looks at him, eyes wide and mouth slightly agape, because the enormity of Hannibal’s desire had been unsheathed and sharp with a slip in control and cracking rooms and growing gaps of cavernous holes in the floors of his mind and walls of his heart; because the enormity of Hannibal’s desire sickens them both.

The awareness fractures in Will's eyes, tenuous threads of meaning understood and ignored in the same instant as he plucks them from Hannibal's still-beating heart.

Hannibal's lip curls, and he walks away.

Will's sleep is broken and riddled with nightmares. The only times he'd slept well since falling off the bluff in Hannibal's death-lock embrace had been under Chiyoh's care, in a fleeting haze of awareness at Hannibal's side.

Will sits in the hallway, sometimes, outside Hannibal's door, willing it to open. Willing his anger to leave, willing Hannibal to forgive him. But forgiveness doesn't happen, it's a conscious choice, and Will can't let go of his anger with everything that's happened the same way Hannibal can't let go of his own unfulfilled expectations constructed and venerated with three years of little more than time to hope.

(Hannibal can't live with his attempted murderer, and can't live without the only person to ever see him and come back for more. Will knows that dichotomy all too well.)

Will can't forgive the trespasses of the past, but he can't forget the way Hannibal's eyes looked in snowfall on his knees, the wet darkness of them in his kitchen, the way he'd looked so vulnerable at Will's side, on nights Will thought they still might die.

Unforgivably human despite his monstrosity, capable of love despite his predisposition to cruelty.

(Will's talking about both of them, Will's talking about Hannibal but the words twist around *his* form, *his* self-image, and he's too aware now to feign ignorance or pretend they don't *stick* the way correct labels do.)

There's something under his anger he doesn't want to understand, a twin ache beating beneath Hannibal's own burning heart, a language he won't translate into reality from cold reflections in darkness.

There's something that forces his body from his bed, when his mind lacks the awareness to stop it, something that leaves him outside Hannibal's door almost every night, until he's conscious enough to force himself back in bed or wakes to find he'd wandered back on his own.

There's something there, as he sits outside Hannibal's room and listens for the gentle beat of breathing to strike the air like a melody, the quiet pitch shifts and changing chords from nightmares they share, nightmares founded by and for each other.

A part of him thinks of opening the door, taking his place beside Hannibal, and saying to hell with the consequences.

(It’s the part of him that wanted to run back to Hannibal before he even knew about Abigail. It’s the part of him that crimson waters and screaming streams couldn’t drown, no matter how they tried. It’s the part of him that walked into Hannibal’s knife, looking for something different; another shade of intimacy.)

He knows better – *should* know better – knows the inevitability of violence: there are kitchen knives and scarred hands sanctified by dragon blood and intimacy, and there's a quiet rage in Hannibal not unlike before, and there’s a vengeful fury in Will not unlike before.

Will doesn’t know who will break first.

Will doesn’t know when Hannibal will try to hurt him again.

(Will doesn’t know if he'll stop Hannibal, and that’s what scares him most of all.)

A few days after Freddie Lounds reminds Will why he is A Bad Person, (because good people do not, maliciously, actively, and even reminiscently, plot the torture, murder, and display of a tabloid journalist just because she keeps insinuating a foreign intimacy into his already strained relationship with a possessive, jealous ex-therapist that he threw off a cliff in a sad recreation of Thelma and Louise, and good people do not dream about recreating *Loto Salmadato,* just so Hannibal will look at him with shining eyes once more, glancing down with a heat to his cheeks and a pride to his words) and *why* exactly Hannibal had decided penetration via knife was their new form of intimacy, Hannibal tells him they should begin to assimilate with the people of Çanakkale, get jobs, even.

“That sounds like a brilliant way to attract Interpol’s attention,” Will says, coolly. “What are you going to be, a Dante expert? A Psychiatrist? Let me guess, a surgeon?”

Hannibal, lost in self-congratulation and memory, glowers at Will, as he’s dragged back down to their mutually constructed hell.

“A curator, actually.”

Will rolls his eyes.

“We don’t need fucking jobs. You have more money than we know what to do with, and I don’t see a point in building a life that’s not going to last.”

“I should think you’d appreciate space,” Hannibal says, and his mask is flaking off like dead, shedding skin, flying in the air like waste, because there’s *anger* there, the depths of which Will’s rarely seen in him. Steel in place of honey-tainted darkness, linoleum promises, and bone-cutter sharp forgiveness, “You crossed state lines for the other end of the country as soon as you could. Married not long after.”

“I wasn’t running from you,” Will hisses, shoving a pointed finger in the muscle of Hannibal’s chest, “I was trying to find the pieces of me you left when you went about smashing your teacups without care for how you *left* them.”

Hannibal's eyes crack before him; the warning snaps of sheets of ice atop a thawing lake, and all that's left is Will's plunge.

"Of the two of us, you are the one who has *always* run from every possible problem or emotion. You ran from me when I revealed your true self. You ran when you saw how I felt, and you ran when easier paths made themselves clear. Your fight is but another *flight,* dear Will. Dismissals in snow, attempted stabbings in Florence, jealousy when my attention is split, anger when it's present.

Do us both a favor," Hannibal continues as he moves closer, low and furious, sparking like an exposed wire, the glint of a train-track rail you're not meant to touch that's always drawn Will in more than it should, "and *decide*. Your refusal to commit to a path, your insistence on indecision no matter the consequences is *exactly* what leaves us here. The very reason Abigail *died*."

Will doesn't recall picking the knife up, but it's in his hand.

He doesn't recall moving into Hannibal's gravity, but here he is.

"DON'T SAY HER NAME!" he shouts, pressing the knife into Hannibal's gut, not yet penetrating skin. "YOU DON'T *GET* TO SAY HER NAME ANYMORE!"

"Who do you think *cared* for her when you were caught in self pity, Will?!" Hannibal shouts back, and it's the first time he's ever heard Hannibal yell, even when he'd been *stabbing* Will he'd been quiet, suppressed, contained and controlled like a self-tamed beast. There's nothing tame in the ripple of anger, coursing through his words, through his eyes, in drowning tidal waves Will loses himself in, "Who do you think made sure she didn't kill herself while you consorted with Jack Crawford, while you plotted my ruin, and laughed at my willingness to trust you?!"

And Will laughs, laughs hard and loud, and doesn't *care* if it sounds unstable, because he *feels* unstable, like a fucking gun with the safety off, like azidoazide azide under a steady stream of water. He's losing it, and Hannibal's cracking too, and they're gonna fucking kill each other, and neither of them care.

There's blood, where Will's knife presses in. Hannibal accepts it, steps into it, like he doesn't care, and it only makes Will more angry.

"You chose to call her dad, so I'd kill him. You chose to isolate us, to *toy* with us, to make us your perfect fucking puppets–!"

"*Still* you disavow yourself of agency, so pathetically *desperate* to be a good man–"

"*Shut up*–!"

Hannibal's hand snakes out to grip Will's around the knife, and unlike Will, there is no deliberation.

With a simple tug, it sinks into Hannibal's flesh, wholly, blade disappearing in him.

Will chokes, but Hannibal's flickering rage, shining through his inhuman fissures, doesn't show the pain.

"Does it feel good, your righteousness?"

Will drops the knife, steps away, paling rapidly, as blood wells up around the wound, and panic seeps into his shaking limbs, but Hannibal doesn't allow him the separation.

"Does hurting me repair the wrongs you've done? Does it bring them back, satisfy your flippant morality? Does it make you into the arid, monochromatic man Molly Foster believed she married?"

Hannibal snarls as he yanks the knife out, shoving Will out of the way, in search of his surgical kit. The metal clatters, viscera and copper-scented mortality spilling on the floor like stolen ichor from the gods.

"Hannibal," Will whispers, because there's so much blood, because he caused that blood, and he doesn't know how to fix it.

Hannibal looks at him, over his shoulder, clutching his abdomen the same way he had on the floor before the dragon.

This time, there's no affection. All Will sees are forts, and Hannibal doesn't allow access.

"Fuck off, Will," he states, accent curdling the words in the air before him, both of them panting, both of them splintering apart and together, the crash of waves wearing down the rock of a bluff.

It's the first time Will's heard him curse. Before they fell and changed in irreversible ways, he'd pictured expletives in a very different setting.

Will watches for a moment, as Hannibal stitches himself back together, thread by thread, the way no one else would. The way Will never has. Will swallows roughly, and leaves.

Will doesn't stay long enough to see Hannibal's lips tremble, copper-tainted ichor and salt: an oblation to his uncaring God.

Things get worse, to Hannibal's nonexistent surprise.

Abigail's memory has always lingered between them, the unspoken regret and guilt, shared along with mutual blame. The neat places she'd slot into, the gap of conversation, the sound of the harpsichord, and memory of her careful attempts to learn. Her ghost and every other lingers, every other miscalculated mistake and lie and deadly secret. Things like that only compound, the rot of ruin that will only ever get worse over time, as it builds. As it grows, and festers, and spreads as mold and mildew and decay.

(Entropy's designs, he thinks.)

The next day, Will finds himself a job at a boat repair place a twenty minute drive away that doesn't care if he speaks the dialect so long as he can repair boats.

Hannibal, still *incazzato* despite his best efforts at compartmentalization, and any number of meditory techniques his Aunt Murasaki had taught him once, points out the hypocrisy, making a sarcastic remark about *Interpol* and *Uncle Jack* and any number of things.

Will ignores him.

Hannibal seethes in quiet indignation.

He picks up his phone and almost asks Chiyoh to come three separate times, craving the strength of her company, craving the so-called paddle she represents in some capacity, clutching the wound he'd made Will give him, and wishing for a moment she'd left Will to drown (or him to drown, or them both to drown), before disavowing the thought and reminding himself exactly how Will's almost deaths have felt to him, and how poorly he'd handle a real death or separation.

The foundations of his mind quiver, cavetto wood moldings unfamiliar with the tumultuous emotions ransacking every fiber of his being, high-vaulted ceilings in countless rooms raining dust on all the finery he's locked away for safe-keeping.

The church organ trembles, plays every variation of a death march he knows, and he *can't control it*, it's all so far from his control that Hannibal craves divine intervention to bring them down, craves the intimacy of cliffside endings, craves the unwitting kindness in Will's previous attempt to end his life. Their life.

(and whatever that amounts to, in the end.)

Because Will comes home smelling like ocean water and salt, with the same aftershave as ever (having acquired it back in Canada, out of spite), and Hannibal has dinner on the table and a bottle of wine to himself, and feels domesticated and caged and furious.

He says nothing, fumes silently, letting Will tense around every kitchen knife in Hannibal's hands, letting every unintentional brush of contact set the other man on edge, letting every pointed conversation navigate through barbed wires they try and catch each other on, have a double meaning for a paranoid mind as he speaks of Daedalus and Icarus and various betrayals carved in stone tablets and scrawled in decaying paper scrolls.

(Falling from the splendor of the sun and stars into the sea's cold embrace, left dead and not reborn.)

Betrayal and forgiveness are best seen as something akin to falling in love, Bedelia had said to him, once.

Forgiveness is a lie we tell ourselves to bask in the joy of more beautiful and less horrible things, he would tell her now. *Hating that which we profess to love is a complicated oath, one*

we seek to disavow for our own release.

And he can't forgive, is *tired* of forgiving, tired of throwing himself at an altar for that which will never come to be, tired of shattered teacups that will never bend to his whims or return to their full beauty again.

Will comes home with a dog, and Hannibal can't help his bitterness, can't stop the poison spilling from his mouth like Typhon, sick of the cold fronts and sick of Will's hypocrisy.

"All that's missing is the wife and your latest attempt to play Medea," Hannibal says coolly, deliberately *not* slamming the silverware into place, as Will seats himself opposite Hannibal at the head of their dining room table, ignoring the place setting at Hannibal's left. "How quick we return to the simplicity of old comforting lies."

"Like you were the virgin Mary with Bedelia," Will snaps back. His dog rears up, upset at the tone, until Will makes a *tss tss* noise at the mongrel to send it back to its bed by the fireplace.

"Bedelia was a means to an end," Hannibal retorts. "I never delighted in self-delusion and imposed restrictions of perceived normalcy to help me sleep at night."

"No," Will says. "You just hurt anyone that could love you until they don't anymore. You just use people until you ruin them."

"You've used people too, used me, even. Are you still claiming tolerance, hiding your delight with fig leaves and lies?"

"I'm not you."

"No," Hannibal says. "But you chose this. You chose to not run, to not return to your ready-made family, to discard your ring and your morals, and still you play the victim."

"You *chose* to imprison yourself, and you *chose* to let me pull you over the bluff."

Love chains us to that which we wouldn't otherwise consider, Hannibal would say, if he trusted Will even a little bit.

But he's not self-destructive. Not in this way. That's never been his pathology.

(He wants to say he's not in love, but lies of omission have been his preference where matters of the heart are concerned.)

"Perhaps it's time to make new choices," he says, picturing his fireplace in his Baltimore office.

In his Memory Palace and in his dilating memories, the patient notes aren't what he burns down when Will comes as Jack's man pretending to care.

"Perhaps," Will agrees, knuckles white around the knife.

Hannibal keeps one in his pocket, just in case.

“How are your dreams, Will? Do they still leave you outside my door?”

“Fuck you,” Will enunciates, mirroring Hannibal’s prior vulgarity.

Hannibal smirks.

“That would be too decisive to be in your character, Will. Wouldn’t want to disappoint Uncle Jack more, now would we?”

Will finds sanity in boat motors and stray dogs, to Hannibal’s continued irritation. It’s verbalized in increasingly bitter communication, with digs at everything from his 'commitment' issues to performance in bed, which is a lot cruder than what he’s come to expect from Hannibal 'Three-Piece-Suit-With-Pocket-Square' Lecter, and is enough to catch him off guard.

“Such startling continued regression is almost impressive,” the older man had said the night before, dabbing delicately at the corner of his mouth that Will wanted to paint in fucking blood. “The dog, the return to familiar problems with easy solutions, avoidance and disguises in grease and oil. One can't help wondering how long until other things come, like a wife you'll fail to get off, and a permanent retreat into that loathsome shell you call a skin.”

“I’m sure a three-year dry spell leaves you room to talk.”

And Hannibal had smirked like sin itself and sipped his wine, casually saying, “You assume it was dry.”

The implication clearly being that it *hadn’t been*, which makes no sense considering, y’know, *prison*.

“Alana wouldn’t have allowed it.”

“Chilton was most indifferent, so long as I answered his insipid questions.”

“Who?” Will had demanded.

Hannibal had smiled demurely, and refused to answer.

Even now, thinking of it makes him angry.

He’s not sure at whom.

Hannibal’s cryptic responses don’t falter on nights Will sits by him near the fireplace, watching the orange flames dance across his features in some ritualistic way he can’t discern.

Hannibal always looks more human by firelight: it's why Will had found so many excuses to restrict their meetings to the man's office, at first.

Hannibal sketches quietly, while Will watches him. It's been part of their routine since Hannibal removed the last of his stitches without Will's help. The subjects will change, ranging from Botticelli paintings to their old haunts, from Ancient Greece to ghosts and memories, but normally, Will's face is featured.

Hannibal pointedly does not show Will his drawings, does not tilt the paper in his direction to seek praise or approval, but Will knows some part of him misses the attention from his old life when Hannibal leaves it by the fire and heads to bed with a belly full of wine and a mouth full of venom he's stored for later.

Will checks, flips through the pages and remembers the drawings he'd received in the letters he had opened, remembers the few drawings he'd smuggled out of Baltimore when Jack asked him to look for more evidence one last time (because, despite all of the FBI's seemingly unshakable confidence, Hannibal would not have been found guilty if he had not willed it so, if he had not told them where evidence existed, if he had not submitted to Will's rejection and accepted Alana's help in a devil-bargain. Jack could have been self-defense, and Will's always known that if Hannibal had gone with his lawyers' wishes, he, Alana, and Abigail, would have been painted under the same, violent brush: accusing a man of refinement of horrible crimes to satiate an ailed and delusional profiler and his knee-jerk boss). They look like him, Botticelli curls and bright, pained eyes.

An expression of suffering and cruelty marring the beauty of it, or enhancing it, in some drawings.

He checks every night he sits with Hannibal, and this is the first time he's looked, and found it wanting, found it different, found it outside of routine.

Hannibal's recreation of *Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus* is discussed, initiated by Hannibal.

"I first drew this when I learned of Miss Lounds' living state..." Hannibal's eyes cut from the fire to Will, assessing, "You can imagine my dismay."

"You knew, then?"

Hannibal's eyes close, and he takes a great breath like he's reliving the moment.

"It clung to the fabrics of your shirt. A particularly offensive sweetness, not unlike chloroform with hints of vanillin and artificial apple. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was."

Will frowns, watching Hannibal swallow a sip of wine without savoring it.

"You offered forgiveness."

“I offered free forgiveness. No consequences.” Hannibal flips to his drawing from the night before, and Will can see his prone form on a tomb of marble, Achilles lamenting him before a sea of specters shaped like friends. “Bella Crawford once told me forgiveness isn’t something you do, it is something that happens to you. I didn’t believe her, of course, until my forgiveness happened without my conscious awareness or consent.”

“I thought you weren’t a product of social circumstance and environmental pressure.”

“I wasn’t,” is the reply Will receives, as Hannibal contemplates the fire. “But, as you put it, you changed me.”

“We’re both changed.”

“Irreversibly. As entropy persists, our change continues.”

“Do you wish for your old existence?”

Hannibal thinks on it, pencil set to the side along with his scalpel. He looks at his drawing with something unreadable in his eyes.

“I dreamt of the past and future for years. Other paths, where we never met. Other lives, where choices were different. I cannot say for certain what my preference would be. There’s emptiness, no matter which branch of the multiverse I reside on, and there’s hunger, no matter how I choose to satisfy my appetite.”

Almost decisively, Hannibal tears the drawing from his sketchbook with a surgeon’s precision. He stands from his chair, walks to the fire, and looks at Will.

“Prometheus stole fire from the gods to gift to mankind. By some accounts, it was re-gifted after Zeus’ wrath stole it from them. By others, it was meant to aid in their expansion, to allow their race to thrive rather than merely live. By all accounts, Zeus chained Prometheus to a rock and sent an eagle to eat his liver each day, as payment for stolen fire from the gods. We evolved from clay and water, but fire is what made us thrive, what allowed us to evolve, despite it being a force associated with destruction.”

“Why did Zeus react in such a way?”

“Knowledge is a painful gift. As God damned Eve for her curiosity at the devil’s whispers, Zeus damned Prometheus for man’s progression and inevitable evolution." Hannibal's eyes cut through Will, ice-cold as he says neutrally, "Deities aren’t known for their mercy, Will.”

Hannibal tosses the drawing in the fire, and they both watch the scene go up in smoke.

“And still, we worship at an altar of sacrifice, prayers mere puffs of smoke susurrations carelessly drifting up to the stars and sky.”

“No one taught God kindness, he had to divine it.”

“He knew it,” Hannibal counters, lips pressed together in a thin line. “Some gifts aren’t to be shared with the masses, nor the most devout pupil. Mercy is something all gods know, as a

part of their becoming and our own. But Prometheus was not granted that boon, when he offered his own gifts to man."

"Fire is destructive. It is wise to be wary of it in man's hands, especially with what mankind's done since."

"I thought so too, once. But Prometheus' plight is not one of wisdom and common sense, nor can it be simplified to empathetic generosity. In his agency, he stole from the heavens and gave to mankind. Offered boons, feared by his gods. Rejected, disavowed. In Chinese medicine, the liver is the organ of anger and regulation. Fitting, the gods took it from him. Don't you agree?"

Will thinks of the smile cut across his stomach, the linoleum blade that had become intimate with his innards.

"What is blood, in Chinese medicine?"

"Vitality, dear Will. Nothing less than the sum of everything."

"Memory without language."

"Oil for the wheels of history."

"Did Zeus ever free Prometheus?"

"Not out of mercy nor affection. *Convenience*," Hannibal spits caustically, bundling all his sentiment into that one word, "came calling, and the shackles were cut by another's hand. I doubt Zeus himself knew fully what would come of such arrangements."

"Prophecies of destruction, visions of a future with his end in it."

"The gods blamed Prometheus for humanity's destructive path, as Christians blame the Devil for Eve's innate urges. Do you still blame me, Will, for the monster you've always been?"

"You changed me."

Hannibal's eyes flicker, some micro-expression shifting before Will's eyes, a hint of disappointment, a rip current of resentment. Will breaks eye contact first, and Hannibal marks it up as a victory. He can tell.

"Change is a part of life. We all adapt to our circumstances the way nature intends. Live or die; there is no morality written in the unspoken laws of the jungle."

"Ruled by impulses and senseless violence?"

"Aware of our desires, and willing to *pursue* them." Hannibal's pursed lips feel like a slight Will wants to chase, with a fist or with something else he can't articulate. "Outside the learned temples of chemistry labs, catalysts are often misconstrued as the cause for the effect. A chemical reaction persists of its own accord, based on the laws of mind and matter and

entropy's guiding hand. A catalyst alters what is present. It allows for the reaction's shift towards what it was inevitably meant to produce. To *create*."

Will watches Hannibal's hands that could kill and heal, that could pry him apart and put him back together with unfathomable care, as they linger on pencils and a spare scalpel.

(A sensitive psychopath that got caught, just to tuck him into bed. His own Janus, thrown in a solution of boiling products, feverish and sweet and too much for curiosity's resistance. His Janus, that had offered forgiveness and meant it, saved their daughter to build a home before wrecking it with the same persistence in two blade strokes.)

Fingers tracing the unmarked pad of paper, like a new design is forming in the tissues of his mind, darting from thought to memory with each calculated stroke before Will's eyes. He wonders, briefly, what Hannibal would design for him or of him, if he asked.

"I'm not the driving force for what you are, Will. I never have been. I act as a catalyst, an agent of change, by altering your environment to hasten the process. Nothing you are would not have Become without my interference. Nothing you've done is because of my influence alone."

Will has no retort, speechless yet again, so he grabs Cephy from her place near the fire and leaves, delighting in the shudder of their screen door as it slams shut.

He hopes Hannibal heard it, and hopes it pissed him off.

Will prefers an angry Hannibal to a distant one. Call him crazy. Maybe he's a masochist, or maybe the ability to read Hannibal with some level of certainty is comforting. Will has never had the option of separating pain from pleasure enough to decide one way or the other, so who knows.

(Hannibal fucking Lecter, probably.)

Will guides Cephy through a path of trees and wildlife, in the direction of the Dardanelles Strait absentmindedly.

The stream of his mind is tainted, and the rooms in his Memory Palace he'd built for all of his friends are similarly stained, as mocking as he'd meant the statement to be, directed at a hardened Alana Bloom in the kitchen of his unmaking. In the woods Abigail lingers, out of sight but never far from his mind, and others are in similar states. Buried emotions and people's ashes cast through an unyielding wilderness, the rejected elements from the last gasp of a dying star, stored as whispered shadows cast by heaven-reaching trees, concealed from his sight and concealed from his judgment. The trees murmur, sometimes in ways that sound like murder and art, other times with borrowed morality from Jack and the old Alana.

None of it quite fits, the reality of his essence caught in the underbrush, or drowned in his screaming stream that sounds like kitchen-intimacies and murder family ends.

He could leave Hannibal. He could take Cephy and run, could say that Hannibal had kept him drugged for the last few months and only just allowed the haze to lift with faked Stockholm

symptoms. He could write books, lecture on Hannibal's beautiful mind, and he could leave Hannibal free and himself free and try again with Molly or find someone else or no one else. He could play the role of the last wife Bedelia had scorned him as.

But he dismisses these thoughts as quick as they come, intrusive on his newfound honesty. He doesn't want to leave Hannibal again, or be left again.

There's no room for wives or children between them, forts or barriers. Those things have faded, been stripped away in the moonlight with black blood and a tangible want for unspoken, unknown things. Slippery vaporous desires, realities Hannibal has tempted him with for years and years and years, the whisperings of his forest with a voice and a face and life to them, foundations he'd never meant to permit.

Will's without moral protections here, his own too shaky and gray to sustain pressure. Alone and together with Hannibal, and a part of him can't help but find relief in each reminder of Hannibal's existence, each exhale heard through the crack of a pale white door, each glare and blunt-force warning. It's so fucked up, but he'd never expected a healthy dynamic with Hannibal.

He's always been a man of everything or nothing, thriving in the extremes of human emotion without middling in indecision. Will's the only person to ever grant him pause, to make him hesitate or question or doubt.

(*I want you to know exactly where I am*, said like a challenge, like an oath by candlelight over an ancient text, *and where you can always find me*.

We couldn't leave without you, said from a predetermined script like a eulogy before death occurs.)

Will's surprised Hannibal had waited this long to traverse this particular conversation: the individuality of their beasts, differing values and aesthetics in their darker leanings.

No, what's more surprising is that Hannibal hadn't concocted an entire meal arrangement around the conversation, that Hannibal hadn't handed Will pomegranates and told him that the seeds had been consumed willingly during their first meal in this house, and that the deal was struck by Will and Will alone.

"He's so fucking over the top," he mutters, kicking at rocks along the well-worn bath beside the ocean water. "Hasn't met a metaphor he hasn't bludgeoned to death with his endless extensions. Can't be bothered to have a normal conversation without the pretentious prattling and vagaries."

Cephy ignores him entirely, flopping on the ground and rolling around in the dirt and wet remnants of last night's snowfall.

Her shiny, gold coat is filthy, when she wriggles closer to him, tail slapping the ground excitedly.

The thought of Hannibal's expression if he were to find Cephy in this state on his furniture is distracting. Distracting enough for his head to cool a little.

Yeah, Hannibal is playing mind games. What else is new? He's done little else in the last three years, Will imagines, and he'll do little else now that he has all the agency in the world he wishes to have.

Meat's back on the menu, he'd said to Bedelia, buttoning his coat and leering at her from a distance, but there hasn't been any meat provided by Hannibal or by Will. There hasn't been any talk of the Dragon, of doing something similar again, or even of Will killing again as Hannibal had always encouraged and pushed towards, in the past.

The expected push and pull manipulations are there, but they aren't intricate or thought out. Instinctive, heat of the moment things. The blunt force tool of knowledge and bitterness, fermenting and reflected in Will's conflicted thoughts and Will's residual righteousness.

It isn't the active shepherding of the past, the involved observation of just before the fall. It feels perfunctory, expected and offered out of routine rather than investment.

Hannibal's caginess and reticence, though unusual for him, had made sense in the aftermath of their fall and the subsequent rebirth from the womb of the Atlantic. Will had extrapolated based on his knowledge of the unknown, and explained behaviors on past action and inaction. Past admittances offered as confessionals; tributes to a deity cut from a cloth not unlike Zeus' own.

But Will isn't always right.

Hannibal's playing with him, and there's an uncertainty about it that Will can't read or interpret. Not affection halting agony (or the possibility for agony), not forts or boundaries or holes in Memory Palace floors.

Something different, something other.

Perhaps, a voice not unlike Bedelia murmurs at the back of his skull, *he's tired of you without the applications of your gift. Insight and mirrors can only be so interesting within the narrow confines of two repetitive images.*

Cephy's wet snout sniffs at his hand, and it's only then Will realizes they'd stopped walking, the subtle sound of systole and diastole reverberating in his ears with the deafness of gunfire.

(The ringing heartbeat in his ears, when he realized his friend wasn't who he thought.)

It is an explanation that, despite his reflexive disbelief, has merit.

Conversation is sparse, and allusions to evolving and becoming more have stopped. They've Become, and yet the conversation is rarely broached. Kills aren't discussed. Art and metaphors to hide the mundanity creeping into their coexistence here. A circumscriptus balancing of resentment and desire, as Hannibal looks but does not touch, as he talks but not intimately, as he lives, but separately.

When life becomes maddeningly polite, think about me, Hannibal, the one he'd taken off the cliff, the one who'd thrown a dead cop out of his patrol car with a cocky grin and offered Will the passenger seat with liquid fire eyes, had said.

Neither had pictured the maddening politeness to have come from them, or *of* them.

Maybe I should have stuck to fixing boat motors in Louisiana, he thinks bitterly, but that thought had been voiced in an attempt at weaponization days before only for Hannibal to prove indifferent and invulnerable once more.

Maybe so, the man had replied, not looking at Will.

It's the first time Will's thought of Bedelia's words willingly, the first time he's granted her image entrance to his mind's thoughts for the sake of clarity.

Could he daily feel a stab of hunger for you and find nourishment at the very sight of you? Yes. But do you... ache for him?

Clearly not, with how Hannibal acts, with how Hannibal doesn't burn so much as freeze, the ice of neutrality and broken bonds without thought or hope for repair. Any ache is one of resentment, fury at emotional bonds taking away from any possible nourishment. Maybe he isn't in love with Will at all, maybe that had just been Bedelia Du Maurier's manipulations of whatever she'd glimpsed in Will's own person suit.

Maybe the tenderness had been a side-effect of being seen, understood, one that Will's misconstrued in his head to Bedelia's amusement.

Maybe Hannibal's feelings don't extend beyond those of a fond pet owner, and maybe they've atrophied with disuse and the passage of time, no matter how real they'd seemed from the other side of the glass.

(Still, Will finds himself in the hall when he wakes, one hand on Hannibal's door. Wanting things he can't bear to ask for.)

The wound scars, as Hannibal had hoped it would.

It's a type of intimacy, in this place void of it, and it's contact he craves and it's touch – even violent – that he's in need of. Bullets and blood loss have left him weak, and his neurochemistry has left him near decrepit. Even in his solitude in Baltimore there had been affairs, short-lived and passionate, entangling and enjoyable, for a time.

The last affair he had was with Antony Dimmond, a one-off before temptation felt like sin without Will.

He'd crafted him into a heart for Will as recompense, not asking for forgiveness but atoning nonetheless. Because Hannibal hadn't regretted the skin-deep satisfaction, the temporary balm over the exposed emotions he'd kept neatly packaged since Lithuania, but he'd regretted where the balm was found, had felt the absence of what he'd wanted and what he'd planned for so profoundly that it'd been impossible to find an afterglow of any kind in wake of all he'd done and all he'd lost; the empty embrace of a vapid lover and the pseudo-pleasures he'd chased with reckless desperation.

But there isn't guilt in the thought of twining limbs and satisfactory perspiration with someone other than Will, now. After the Fall, it feels like a foregone conclusion, the answer to a trailed-off question, the paragraph after an ellipsis. Hannibal isn't deluded by thoughts of grandeur, isn't seduced by promised benedictions and communions with a partner and equal.

He doesn't wish for an equal, Hannibal thinks, fingers dancing along the loose seams of his stitches, meant to leave a permanent mark for when Will leaves once more. *He wants a captor for his darkness, or a victim of his morals. Partnership is no longer feasible, a faint wish from better times.*

(His heart, of course, does not follow the same steps, slipping through holes full of sentiment, through the truth of the eternal conveyed in transient clichés of ever-blooming blossoms. It follows Aristotle's musings on one soul split between bodies, it listens to Kierkegaard's *agape*, refutes Butler's cynicism, and thinks love can save him from life as Neruda speculated.

His mind screams at him, the howl of a feral creature not willing to be caged, hears *I loved him and sometimes, I thought he could love me too* and snarls, scratches at the blindfold and precipice Sartre wrote of and wants to *think* more than he wants to jump, but Hannibal had jumped so long ago, had already crossed the precipice and armed himself with a thick cloth blindfold and patience. Caged himself in *agape's* cold embrace, choked blue on confessions silenced out of self-preservation, sated his appetite by scent alone until betrayal burned that comfort away too.

Forgetting is so long, and love is so short, and belonging is painful when it isn't mutual or wanted.

I hate what I love, Catullus wrote of his lover. *I feel it happening, and I am tortured.*

And it's not in a painting, not quite desiderium built up behind suits and veils and protections, not art-evoked emotions, not safe affections for discardable pawns and knights and bishops on his chessboard, it's love, and love is destructive the way entropy is, and he's never perfected *kintsugi* enough to make it a safe endeavor (loving, that is).

His love is a natural disaster, a divine providence, and he doesn't know how to love any other way. Doesn't know how to save himself from this mutually assured self-destruction, how to flood the world and ensure no arc is built.

Deicide would only hurt them both, after all. And parting is such sweet sorrow.

When Will leaves, they don't speak, Hannibal's eyes tracking his cruel boy's retreating form, watching it disappear in his old shell with the scent of motor oil and sea spray.

The dog, from its place in the living room, raises its head to look at Hannibal.

Hannibal blinks, looking at it, and feels the claws of domesticity itch at him again.

He's tried not being impulsive, tried not causing more arguments than absolutely necessary, but he's tiring of these white walls and unfamiliar-familiar sights.

Will's already stabbed him, what is left? Another bluff?

Jaw set, Hannibal dresses in a three piece suit and lets his longer hair hang over his eyes.

The threat of being caught is more alluring than the silence of his house, right now.

As he grabs the keys to their spare car, almost unthinkingly, he texts Chiyoh a simple name, one he hasn't cared to think of for a few years now.

Her reply is a hotel, one not far from where Hannibal had intended to go.

(Celibacy is, after all, a covenant with God, and Hannibal is tired of prayers unheeded.)

Ulysses Lafayette's hotel is just as ostentatious as Hannibal had expected, right on the waterfront with a good view of the bustling city life around them. A valet takes his car (polite enough to not warrant *that* kind of comeuppance for dear Will) and the front desk staff is rather accommodating. He lies, of course, spinning a tale of surprising his 'husband' for their anniversary, asks if they would help him with it after saying the room number, and it's so easy. They're putty in his hands, only requiring beatific smiles and feigned earnesty, refreshing compared to his heavy-handed attempts at manipulating Alana Bloom (given that she knew and could spot anything subtle).

He opens the door with the swipe of a card, satisfied when he hears the downpour of shower water. Snagging a bottle of champagne and glasses the hotel had provided, he positions himself in the living room area.

It only takes a moment, once he uncorks the champagne, for Ulysses' shower to stop, and for him to call a gruff, "Is someone there?"

Hannibal smiles, as Ulysses steps around the corner, eyes widening as he sees him.

"Hello, Ulysses."

"Dr. Lecter," the other man says, smiling back after a blink. "I didn't expect to see you again."

"I was in the area," Hannibal says. "I wanted to see how you've progressed. Your tableaus are quite beautiful, the ones found, at least."

Ulysses' eyes are a rich, languid darkness similar to Hannibal's own, and he shudders at the praise as Hannibal had known he would.

"You've been watching?"

"I always have."

Ulysses glances down at his towel, flushing briefly.

"Let me dress, then we can catch up. I'm curious to hear what has happened with you as well."

Hannibal nods, catching that which Ulysses wishes to hide permeate the air.

So easy, he thinks.

It's a thought he's had before, with other fledgling killers infatuated with his darkness, with his interest in their darkness. There's a rhythm to it, a pattern, and rarely does the killer *see* him enough to know not to ask.

Ulysses had seen enough to warrant caution, but had been too interesting to kill.

An odd mix of neuroses Hannibal had coaxed into a more beautiful manifestation, allowing the dark to truly shine through the vapid plaster of Ulysses' exterior.

Speaking of…

"Apologies for leaving you waiting," his former patient says, with a crooked grin. "I see you've already got the champagne for this reunion."

Hannibal mirrors his grin, pouring a generous amount into two glasses, passing the first to Ulysses before raising his own.

"I believe cheers are in order," he says. "I heard through the grapevine you were offered on as a full partner at your firm."

Ulysses clinks his glass against Hannibal's, taking a hearty swig.

"They offered, I declined. I didn't feel quite like settling in Baltimore. I wanted to see the world."

"To find more inspiration?"

Ulysses' grin sharpens.

"You've given me expensive tastes, Doctor. Baltimore's art collections weren't enough, and New York grew tiresome after the fifth person."

"The Baroque Killer is what they called you."

“A humble title, compared to my true artistry. I’ve branched into the stylings of Rococo and Surrealism, lost in tidal waves of inspiration.”

“Tidal waves of darkness,” Hannibal says. “Does it still whisper to you, formication and beautiful screams?”

“It’s more of a euphoric cry now than the whimper it once was,” Ulysses replies, eyes distant as though recalling his work. “Coaxed from its restrictions. It’s not an itch so much as a sting, brief and pleasant.”

“As an artist yourself, the majesty of ancient works is no longer oppressive.”

“It’s a beautiful pain,” Ulysses says, sipping at his glass again, “the pounding heart, knowing I’ll feel it outside my body soon. Hallucinations are more palatable as inspiration.”

Hannibal takes a drink of his own glass, the sweet taint of carbonation and alcohol bleeding into his taste buds.

“Inspiration is often evoked in times of madness. I found your take on Frank Xaver Winterhalter’s *Princess Elizabeth Esperovna Belosselsky* particularly haunting.”

Ulysses’ smiles.

“I dreamt of it for weeks,” he says reverently. “My muse was a barista at my second favorite coffee shop, back in New York. She was so beautiful, even in her impatience. I saw her potential right away.”

“As I saw yours,” Hannibal says, placing a hand on Ulysses’ shoulder and squeezing lightly. “You elevated her from the filth of her surroundings.”

“Elevation,” Ulysses echoes, sampling the word on his tongue. “It felt like deification.”

Hannibal squeezes his shoulder once more before letting go, tracking the flicker of disappointment with satisfaction.

“We make our own gods.”

“But you don’t,” Ulysses says. “I read about your trial. The Ripper. It was…beautiful.”

(*It’s beautiful,* mouth over mouth, shared breaths as flesh begets flesh, as hearts palpitate and shudder together, as bloodstreams unify as their union is seen over by the corpse of a dragon.

He stabs the words, guts them with linoleum, drugs them with sedatives, shreds them with bonesaws and bullets.

They ricochet, and his Memory Palace is bleeding from it: *it’s beautiful. It’s beautiful. It’s beautiful.*

A maddening echo.)

“It’s been a few years since I fit that title,” Hannibal replies, smile shrinking slightly.

Ulysses shakes his head, eyes warm as he reaches out to Hannibal.

“I saw the Great Red Dragon on Tattlecrime. It was equally…exquisite. I haven’t yet found a proper muse, but my mind craves a replication.”

(*It’s beautiful* , Will says, a dark, feral, lovely thing. Hannibal’s teeth are sharp, but his mind won’t let him use them.)

“I’d love to watch you work,” Hannibal purrs, picturing the cold undulation of the rolling Atlantic bringing Will out to sea. “I often find the beauty of art is limited without a thorough understanding of the process.”

Ulysses bites his lip, and the sharp scent of arousal cuts through the air.

“I worried you were dead, when I heard the news. I’ve wondered why you didn’t call me to take your case. I would have. Gladly.”

Ulysses hand moves from Hannibal’s shoulder to his hand, fingers intertwining slowly, gently. Hannibal allows it, for the moment, picturing a hand callused by manual labor rather than the soft, manicured hands of a lawyer that's lived a life of wealth and privilege.

(The contact burns and broils; there are no forts built for this intimacy, any more.)

“It was a gesture.”

“For Will Graham?”

Hannibal’s eyes narrow.

“I’d rather not discuss it.”

“So we won’t. There are other things we can do.”

Hannibal’s expression softens into something coy and seductive, a mask he’s kept shelved for the last three years.

“Am I to be your muse?”

Ulysses smirks, tugging Hannibal flush against him with a steady confidence that reminds him of Will with a gun in his hand and righteous fury in his heart.

“Muses are fickle, Doctor Lecter. I consider you a patron.”

“Or a benefactor,” Hannibal offers, leaning closer, coaxing Ulysses to break first.

“Then may we both reap the benefits,” Ulysses utters, smashing their lips together.

Hannibal smirks, and he doesn’t think of Will Graham.

“Y’know, if I were Hannibal, I might say something about you trying to fix what you can since you can’t fix him,” Abigail says lightly, watching Will work from her perch. “Do you still want to fix him?”

“People aren’t teacups, Abigail,” Will says, quietly. “We are beings of marble and hardened clay, not porcelain and gold cracks.”

“I was porcelain,” she says, tracing the cut on her neck as Will watches it bleed gold.

Will shut his eyes, wiping things yet to shed.

“I know.”

“He loved us.”

“He doesn’t know what love is.”

“I think you want to think that,” Abigail says. “Because you don’t like the thought of love being cruel.”

“I also don’t like being psychoanalyzed.”

“It’s the only way to keep you honest, *Dad*." The title sounds taunting, a ransom with no hope of return. “Abandonment requires expectation, and he abandoned you.”

“I expected it.”

She looks at him like he’s stupid.

“Did you?”

Will squeezes his eyes tight, wishing she’d leave. Because no, he hadn’t seen the knife, hadn’t seen retribution at the end of a knife and shattering of teacups.

“You abandoned him,” she continues, without mercy. “He waited. You didn’t come until you needed something.”

“I never needed him.”

When he opens his eyes, she’s smiling fondly.

“You’re such a goddamn liar. Why else would you be here?”

“I’ve lived without him.”

“Viruses persist between hosts. Does that make them alive?”

“No,” Will says.

“They’re unstable, placid, incapable of producing their own energy.”

“Are you implying *Hannibal Lecter* keeps me stable?”

Abigail passes him the wrench he needs, shrugging.

“You’re implying it. Directly saying it, even.”

Will blinks, realizes *he’d* grabbed the wrench, and his eyes sting.

“I’m not real, Will,” she says gently, hand cold where it lingers on him. “I never have been.”

“I know,” he says, thickly.

“Hannibal is real.”

“Hannibal unmade you.”

She gives a sad smile.

“He saved me for you both, saved me twice, and he took me away because of your split loyalties. It hurt him to do so. He loved me.”

“He can’t love,” Will whispers.

Abigail snorts, but it sounds like a sob.

“He would show you, if you’d let him. He’d carve his heart out and sate himself on your teeth.”

“Have you been reading Dante?”

“No,” she says, picking up a book he’d cast aside earlier. “You have.”

“I wish you weren’t dead.”

“People aren’t teacups, Will. Maybe it’s time you aim for something other than destruction.”

Hannibal lets Ulysses drag him to the bed before he takes control, pinning his former patient to the mattress as nails scratch his skin.

It’s a pleasant shade of pain, but not quite what he’s looking for, not right now.

(If he needs pain, he has Will for as long as Will persists in limbo. Will's only consistency is that offering, one Hannibal isn't always eager to receive.)

"Strip," Hannibal orders, teeth at a neck (whose neck it is matters little, he's more interested in the comfort of skin-to-skin contact than the intimacy of eye contact) as moans fill the room. "Let me see you."

(*See? See? See?* Echoing the bluff, the kitchen, time and space, memory and reality. *See? See? See?*)

And he does, inch by inch of alabaster skin revealed, scarless and marble-like in a way his and Will's flesh no longer is. Ulysses is responsive, beautifully responsive, keening at the slightest scratch along his unmarred skin, trying to rub against Hannibal with every wriggle of his hips as his suit is thrown aside in a crumpled heap.

(Hannibal allows himself to be undressed, lets the buttons on his shirt rip, lets the tie fall to somewhere out of sight, lets the fabrics wrinkle because he doesn't care to hide this indulgence, to regret it the way he might have, once.)

Hannibal bites Ulysses' shoulder hard enough to draw blood, and whispers, "Lay down on your stomach, and don't move."

Hannibal pulls himself off, noting Ulysses' hardness with a flush of heat, and unties the drapes of the canopy bed.

Normally, he'd ask his partner for consent with bondage, ask for a safe word.

But Hannibal doesn't care, at this moment. Safety is a thing of the past, lost to entropy, lost to bluffs eroded by ocean water, lost to goodbyes and discarded masks. Ulysses won't tell him to stop, won't deny Hannibal anything.

It's conditioning, his eagerness to please Hannibal. Conditioning that's most useful, now.

(He won't resent Hannibal his nature, won't tolerate with fig leaves, will delight the way others have, the way Tobias had, the way Randall would have, were he to have known and seen and lived).

He loops the silken drapes tightly around Ulysses' pliant limbs, and ignores the psychosomatic creep of a straitjacket embrace on his skin.

Ulysses shivers, back muscles tense with anticipation, and Hannibal takes a moment to appreciate this vessel of pleasure and murder, to indulge…

(Five miles in winter snow before Chiyoh finds them, five miles with trembling limbs, each step an excruciating stretch on his inflamed skin as the brand shifts and stings with each adjustment of his precious burden. Five miles in snow and twenty five in the car, Will draped across his lap, hand to his pulse with prayers in his mind as he urged Chiyoh to speed.)

"Hannibal?" Ulysses asks, still shivering before him, a blank canvas waiting to be painted.

(*You couldn't forget him during our couplings,* Bedelia murmurs, mouth whetted with wine and desire. *What makes you think this will end differently?*)

"Hush, *mio Odisseo*," he presses into the pulse of Ulysses' neck, reaching for a discarded tie and balling it up into a makeshift gag. Hannibal yanks his partner up by the hair at his nape, watching desire flicker like a roaring bonfire across Ulysses' face. "Open for me."

His lips part, mouth happily accommodating the silk cloth that easily costs a small fortune. Hannibal's fingers wander, tracing the curvature of Ulysses' mouth with an artist's eye, but even that has memories, links, and his mind rapidly fires through them before he can employ self-control.

He moves on; some things he has no reason to associate with Will.

There's a knife in his pocket, a small utility blade he's kept as a precaution, should Will surprise him once more with forgiveness or God's mercy, and it comes useful now.

In a much more pleasurable light.

He flicks it open and releases Ulysses' hair–

(With all my knowledge and intrusion I could never entirely predict you. I can feed the caterpillar and I can whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches follows its own nature and is beyond me.)

–the impulse comes, to cut his throat. To gut him like a lover. To lash out, release some of his amassed disappointment and unpredictable volatility.

He abstains from a permanent type of pain, drawing the metal along his canvas delicately, like the brush of a thumb over cheekbone. Ulysses' moan – of pain or pleasure – is muffled by the gag, and skin weeps like a downpour of rain at the end of his world. Crimson retribution, as Ulysses grinds into the mattress, and Hannibal's hard enough for his ache to shift organs.

He goes deeper, cuts enough for the weeping trails to thicken, for it to spill over onto white satin sheets like a crime scene–

(Love. He pays you a visit or he doesn't.)

Will's home, and the house is silent. There's no scent of dinner to greet him, no simmering pots filled with all matters of worldly cuisines. There's no glass of wine next to a bookmarked text on philosophy, nor the extravagance of a made up dining room table.

Cephy greets him briefly, tail happily wagging as she gives him a greeting lick, but Hannibal does not appear.

“Hannibal?” he calls, walking the empty halls of the first floor before ascending the staircase.

Hannibal doesn’t answer, wherever he may be. His bedroom door is locked, as Will had expected, and he can’t help the sigh that escapes him.

They haven’t spoken in what might’ve been days or weeks, not about any matters of importance. Sparse conversation about boat motors and maintaining a low profile. He’d tried, once, to ask about the stab wound, to see how it’s healed, but Hannibal had shut down the conversation with misdirection, with calculated reveals of anger, enough to incite Will’s own or overwhelm him with waves of insight.

He presses his forehead against the door, leans on it with his hand trembling against the thick wood of the barrier erected between them.

Will thinks in pendulum swings, what he’d pictured at the top of the cliff.

“*It’s beautiful*,” he says, high on ecstasy and intimacy, caught in Hannibal’s hot darkness and warm eyes, feeling their emotions in crystal fractals between them like a kaleidoscope.

He doesn’t pull them over, tugging Hannibal closer, closer, closer, until he’s pressed flush against the older man and craving more than can be found in outlines of identity and flesh-grounded humanity. He wants to stitch himself in the linings of Hannibal’s skin, wants to sew himself in the walls of Hannibal’s heart, wants to paste over the holes in Hannibal’s mind until there’s nothing of teacups or time or the laws of disorder – only Will, only them, only this beauty and this feeling Will’s spent his entire life decrying and will spend the rest of it chasing and indulging in.

Hannibal presses his forehead against Will’s, more human than ever before as their wounds meet and kiss, blood calling to blood, and their fingers are intertwined and both their eyes are searching, looking, examining.

Hannibal never will move first, stopping shy of irrevocable intimacy and lines that can’t be erased. Will wants to bridge the gap, but doesn’t know how.

“They will find this place, soon,” Hannibal murmurs, and Will feels it fan across his face, and wants to chase it to its source.

“I don’t care.”

“Will you leave?” Hannibal asks, and it’s only because Will is so close, because Will is watching so intently, that he can feel the tremble in Hannibal’s limbs, the unease from something other than blood loss. It’s only because he’s looking at Hannibal’s eyes and wishing he could make man with four arms and four legs as Prometheus intended that he sees Hannibal’s stitchings tighten around his ecstasy, sees the afterglow fading with the rising sun, sees the separation expected as Hannibal lets himself begin to grieve once more.

“I can’t live without you,” Will answers, shifting to clutch the older man’s waist. “I won’t.”

His arm snakes around Hannibal's neck, and he's not sure what he's doing, what he's feeling, only that he needs more the way he needs air, and that he never actually got over Hannibal Fucking Lecter.

"You can," Hannibal says, eyes half-lidded and drunk on the sight of him. "You have before."

"Exsanguination isn't something I seek. I never wanted it. I thought…I thought it was the only choice I could exist with. I was dead, with you. I was dead without you. Limbo felt… better. Like I could live."

"Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Live." The word bleeds in Hannibal's mouth, a festering wound Will wants to bandage and clean, to care for the way Hannibal cared for him before they parted three years ago.

"No," Will says, tugging Hannibal down. "I don't know how to be alive without you anymore."

Their lips don't meet, because that's not what happened. Because Will is not on the cliff, and because *it's beautiful* had been a final bit of honesty between them before rebirth and before all the lies and empathetic cruelties returned.

Because he's in the hallway before the pale door, having never entered, having never smiled behind the veil despite the laughter.

Because he's in the hallway and he's alone, and his dick's out and there are tears in his eyes because it had been too fucking beautiful to last.

Because he's found ecstasy in memory, in recreation, but it pales to that which once could have been.

I couldn't make you love me, he thinks, wiping the soured satisfaction from his hands and the door he's lost access to, *and I'm tired of your teeth*.

Alkaline desires and the heady pants of a lover's as yet unmet cravings, as he drags the blade down Ulysses' back in two diagonal lines from the first cut. He unifies them with a third horizontal line, just above the plushness of Ulysses' ass; an alchemical fire.

Hannibal's eyes flutter, dark curls replacing honey-blond ones, and it makes his chest rattle, makes his bones shutter their earthly cage and want a release or relief. So Hannibal chases the scent across his painted symbol, laps at the blood eagerly, teeth and tongue and sucking marks that paint in a pallet of bruises and blood.

Eager to hear the muffled sounds, the orchestra of a distraction he's conducting, he removes the gag.

"Am I your muse?" Ulysses murmurs, hoarse, gasping as Hannibal rocks against his body, dragging the other man's cock through the crime-scene sheets without mercy, and without release. "I'd let you elevate me, mon chérie."

"This *is* elevation," Hannibal says. (*My design*, Will taunts). "Now, suck."

Ulysses strains his neck looking at Hannibal, mouth around three of Hannibal's fingers. He's methodical about it, slow and languid, not so much lazy as purposeful.

(It reminds him, faintly, of Antony Dimmond, on his knees with laughing eyes, asking if Hannibal would break him on the wheel before being broken himself. Hannibal had to give it to him: they'd both been broken, not long after. The wheel would've been more merciful than Will, however.)

Hazy eyed and trusting, the glimmer of knowledge deep and dark in his blue eyes, like a covenant by candlelight binding them together.

Hannibal pumps his fingers in and out of Ulysses' mouth rapidly, to the racing pulse of the body beneath him, and he waits until Ulysses' gags, nearly choking on the digits, before granting him a small mercy. His choking fingers for that same discarded gag, because he doesn't want to hear that Canadian enunciation in place of any imagined accents.

(Hannibal doesn't use lube.

He should, but he wants it to hurt, because it's *meant to*.)

Hannibal's anal foreplay is brisk, just enough to make room for his cock before he fucks into the tight heat and foreign dopamine highs. He fucks Ulysses apart in colored bursts of clarity, when sensation and pleasure derived from his protégé's pain is enough to tear him from the mausoleum his Memory Palace is becoming – rubble and blood and mourning with the notes of death trailing every recollection – and he does it with Ulysses' head pressed into the mattress, presenting for him like a well-trained pet, and he's still bleeding from cuts and bitemarks, dizzy with arousal, and Hannibal's world spins and spins and–

(*Even Steven*, Will said with a smile, his proverbial mouse left bloody on top of Hannibal's dining room table.)

–not with a bang but a whimper, that's how he finds release. Ulysses' muffled shouts give him away, coming on his bloody sheets and relaxing into his binds, but Hannibal's come with the aftertaste of broth and foreign meat, of daughter blood and rain water, of tears and grief and things life never equipped him to deal with.

He comes silently, sliding out of Ulysses immediately after. There's beauty to be found, in the blood and ruin of his canvas, in his protégé's near unconscious form, in his own orgasm, but he feels love's blindfold keenly, wrapped tight around his eyes.

There's beauty here, but Hannibal can't yet find it. It hurts, the unpleasant nature of unwanted overstimulation, too much after a complete absence of it, no gloves offered.

He removes the gag from Ulysses mouth and slips him from the drapes.

"I've put my number in your phone," he says, offering Ulysses a wet towel. "We'll have to schedule another catch up."

Ulysses smirks from his crumpled position, beckoning Hannibal over with the crook of his finger. He kisses Hannibal, almost gentle, and his nails scrape at the brand on Hannibal's back until there's a sting.

(He wishes it were a knife in Will's hands, because Hannibal feels gutted.)

"Hopefully soon," his killer purrs, pressing a parting kiss to Hannibal's neck. "I want to show you how I've changed."

(*I've changed*, the ghost says. *You've changed me*.)

Hannibal fakes a smile and leaves.

"Where were you?" Will demands, when he comes home and it's dark. Will's dog wags its tail at him, the only happy thing here.

"You needn't concern yourself with my comings and goings, Will. I was careful."

"That's not what I asked," Will hisses, fists clenched.

Hannibal wishes Will would strike him.

"I'm aware," he says, breezing past him.

"Are you bleeding?"

Hannibal hadn't bandaged the one mark Ulysses had left, too eager to leave, to be alone with his thoughts and crumbling walls and forts.

"I didn't know you cared, Will, is this an extension of your mercy?"

"Your suit is wrinkled," Will continues, brow furrowed as evidence is cataloged and analyzed. "Did you get in a fight?"

"Of sorts," Hannibal says, a half-truth.

"Should I be concerned?"

Hannibal offers a slanted grin.

“My life is still in your hands, it would seem. My string has not yet been cut. The fates bow to your volatility, for now.”

“Hannibal,” Will starts, and Hannibal knows how it will go, can see it playing out like moves in chess. He’s not eager to be manipulated, blind or otherwise.

“I’ll see you for dinner,” Hannibal dismisses.

Will doesn’t protest, and Hannibal convinces himself the come he scents in the hall before his room is residual, his own spilled desire.

(It’s not, but he’s not ready to face any other possible conclusions to be drawn.)

Will tries to soften the way he hadn’t after their mutual kill. He stops picking fights over the past (for the most part), stops whining about the art and exorbitant luxuries that’ve been here longer than him, stops voicing his thoughts through Abigail’s specter where it feels safer and more distant, lets himself admit that he’s aching too, every type of ache ever experienced, lets the longing encompass him, lets himself look at Hannibal and see the monster and the man.

Hannibal sees this change, and sharpens accordingly. A shift to maintain equilibrium: Le Chatelier's principle.

(and Will tries to understand, tries to let himself see through Hannibal’s eyes, tries to understand what’s going through his monster’s mind, but it’s different, changed by Will’s influence and by the cold bars of his gold-plated enclosure, and the Memory Palace he’d once known, that Hannibal had found him victorious in, barrs him entry, denies him intimacy. There’s eye contact and words spoken, but they are limp, dead things in the air.

They’re lies, all of them, of varying degrees of offense, and Hannibal’s not backing down or offering compromises, right now.)

Will’s doing the dishes by hand, scrubbing silver in the sink to avoid the inevitable bitching about tarnishing and damage, soaking porcelain and fine china, and Hannibal’s at the counter reading Tattlecrime and Freddie’s articles, not looking at him.

Will wants Hannibal to look at him, craves it, even.

(He wants what he’d had on the bluff, eroding away as their porcelain pieces came together and fell apart on the way down. People aren’t teacups, but he and Hannibal aren’t really people.)

Will’s eyes trace Hannibal’s form, pleased despite everything that his skin’s regained a healthy glow. His cheekbones aren’t dagger-sharp so much as glass-sharp, his core strength has returned, and his muscle mass is already almost back to what Will remembers seeing in between gasps of air, revealed at last by a tight white shirt covered in family blood.

(And it's strange, isn't it, that Will's been nude, been drugged, been gutted, been shot and stitched together by Hannibal's careful, callous hands? That the closest to nude he's ever seen Hannibal had been in his kitchen, stripped of games and veils and person suits, raw and ugly and vulnerable in a way that hurts observer and observed. The closest he's come to having the upper hand where Hannibal is concerned had been a gun in that very kitchen, pressed to a temple as Hannibal shied away in submission. Or a recliner next to a bed in a house that'd stopped being home, a notebook full of sprawling equations Will didn't understand until later, until it was too late to change a thing, Hannibal's borrowed jacket zipped to his chin, stiff from pain and pride, and the sheen of hurt as Will tells Hannibal goodbye.

The most naked Hannibal can be is stripped of suits and ties and lies and power plays, where he can't hide behind words and protégés and calculations, where he's reactive and animalistic and where they both leave bearing scars.)

The cup slips from his hand as he's drying it, caught in the forest by his stream, tangled in branches of associations and forgotten expectations.

It's just a cup, but he notices too late that it's a teacup, slipping into the casual gravity of entropy.

Hannibal looks at him, when the porcelain hits the ground and fractures.

(*I'm not satisfied when it doesn't gather itself up again*, Hannibal said, and they were speaking of Mischa and Abigail, of their friendship and its reconstruction, of everything that went wrong and everything that could have been. Hannibal had said he was sorry, years before, and this is the first time Will truly believes him.)

There aren't words to describe the brief flicker Will catches, the micro-expressions painted in watercolor streaks, blurring known and unknown into an indiscernible gray.

"Careful, Will," Hannibal says. "The teacup is broken. It's never going to gather itself back together."

"You'd know," Will can't stop himself from saying. "Wouldn't you?"

Hannibal smiles, but it's all teeth.

"I am the one who deigns to try, yes."

(And Will's thinking of that notebook he'd kept, shoved in Molly's attic, tucked in his coat jacket like a love letter as he went to break Hannibal out of prison without knowing what end he desired. Will's thinking of the hours he'd spent understanding, comprehending, as Hannibal rode back to Baltimore in Jack's car, as he accepted Will's judgment as a loyal apostle, as he confessed and kept confessing, as the trial commenced and Will refused to go, and Alana and Fredrick fought tooth and nail to keep an indifferent Hannibal alive on an insanity plea. Will's thinking of Lorentz equations and desperate attempts at traversing the river of time, going against the current, reorienting the arrow, rectifying the broken pieces of the teacups left across time and space. Will's thinking of guilt, waves of it, interspersed by

bouts of self-hatred mixed with alcohol, drowning thoughts of what could have been, and attempts to kill the part of him that wanted to run away with Hannibal.

Will's thinking of how Hannibal tried, for three years, waiting for forgiveness not at gunpoint or a knife's edge, and how Will dragged him off a cliff in a final attempt to win a zero-sum game.)

"Did you keep writing in prison?" Will asks carefully, staring down at porcelain pieces and wondering how to not cut himself on them.

"You'd know," Hannibal echoes. "You burned my letters, I'm sure."

I didn't, Will doesn't say. *Not one of them. I opened three, and hid them in a box of things I stole from your house, before they stripped it for Jack's museum. I kept it with that notebook full of remorse, and I couldn't open the rest because I didn't want to think about you anymore. I waited two years for more letters, and you stopped after my wedding date. I waited two years for letters, and I couldn't even burn the last one you sent me because reading it felt like I was with you.*

He chokes on the words, feels them bundle in his throat as his nerves click like roller coaster cogs.

"I meant your equations," Will says instead, swallowing everything else down, regulating the unspoken to his forsaken crimson stream full of thoughts and memories suspended on dust that he sinks to the bottom to try to forget. "The ones you were writing–"

"Before you rejected me?" Hannibal interjects dispassionately, half-lidded eyes cutting from him back to the tablet. "My mind knows them well-enough. They're scrawled into the walls of several rooms like ancient ruins from a long-gone civilization. Depictions of dead hopes and dreams."

Will shakes the soap from his hands, wiping himself off with the drying towel as he turns to fully face Hannibal.

"Why here?" he asks. "Why Turkey?"

"This wasn't always Turkey," Hannibal murmurs, tilting his face up to the roof as he had in his cell, looking for sunlight in an abyss. "It once held host to a number of different empires and kingdoms."

"You said it saw the destruction of Troy."

"Are you familiar with the concept of *ouroboros*?"

"The cycle of creation and destruction."

"Yes," Hannibal says, turning the tablet off and setting it down. He looks up at Will, through strands of hair. "It's the oldest allegorical symbol in alchemy; the concept of eternity, and endless return. The Egyptians believed ouroboros to depict time to be cyclical, the rise and fall of the sun and the moon, rotating night skies and mapped stars with reliable returns. Its

meaning evolved from solar cycles to encompass the unity of end and beginning. The Gnostics viewed ouroboros as a sign of man's dichotomy – divine and earth-bound – trapped in union. Breaking it, the cycle of eternity, was the alchemist's *El Dorado* . Ending the cycle was speculated to lead to the philosopher's stone."

"Were you wanting to reverse entropy with your equations," Will asks, "or ouroboros?"

"Crafting gold and silver from baser elements has never been a desire of mine, nor do I long for life without death. What is time for you, Will?"

"A stream of drifting realities, each equal parts true and false."

"Muddy and fluid," Hannibal remarks. Will can't place the tone. "Troy was destroyed and rebuilt nine times. Caught in a cycle of growth and recession, with each new iteration more fantastical, more beautiful. Ancient Troy, the one Homer writes of, was wealthy and powerful. It took a decade to take the city, to break the numerous fortifications. It was only with lies and trickery the Greeks won, and the city persisted even after. Stubborn till the end.

It took many lives with it, and saw the deaths of many more each immolation. Eventually, they stopped rebuilding. Temples were no longer constructed, houses no longer built, theaters no longer thought of or enjoyed. Did they break the cycle of eternity, or fall victim to entropy?"

"They learned helplessness," Will says.

Hannibal doesn't look at him, but Will doesn't need him to. This is the clearest he's been, and Will's thoughts are shifting to his, floating down the stream through the woods without sinking.

"Subject to unalterable circumstances, the only reasonable response the mind can offer is acceptance."

Will frowns.

"Hunger, like hope, dies without fuel."

"There are only so many teacups to drop," Hannibal murmurs, slipping away as Will's tenuous grasp on his mind falters. "Until *ouroboros* is unbearable. I liken it to building forts and weathering the storm. There's nothing helpless about choices."

Hannibal stands, and walks towards the staircase. He pauses, a hand on the railing, and looks over his shoulder at Will.

"You want to know why I selected Turkey, Will? It has little to do with practicality or distance. I told you, in another life, that Achilles wished all Greeks would die, so he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone."

Hannibal smiles, but it's a sad thing, and Will feels his face slip into it too, caught in rapture at the steps to Hannibal's Memory Palace, willing the door open once more.

“All Greeks are dead, here,” Hannibal says. “It is unknown where Trojan horses and divine intervention will come in, but there are no Greeks. It felt…”

Hannibal shakes his head, seemingly at himself, and shuts Will out as he ascends.

But Will knows.

It’d felt like home, or the potential for it.

Will bites his lip, and picks up the porcelain shards.

(He bleeds for it, with every shaking slip, and he wishes Hannibal would bandage them, wishes entropy would reverse, wishes for a philosopher’s stone to spin gold from the lead life they’re living between lines of color.)

Our ashes would have been mixed, he wants to say, to articulate, to let Hannibal feel. The sonorous pulse of ocean water beckoning him, the tantalizing call of life and death, unions and finality: an end to entropy, because there is nothing to be undone where death is concerned. *We would have shared an amphora, as Achilles once wished.*

But people aren’t teacups, and they’re not heroes: he never wore Hannibal’s armor to battle, and they are not, by any accounts worth mentioning, lovers.

(*He’d carve his heart out and sate himself on your teeth,* Abigail had said, because he couldn’t hear the thought in his own voice without the aftertaste of guilt, of resentment, of memories. *He would show you, if you’d let him.*

And maybe they're both tired of teeth, maybe it’s learned helplessness holding them hostage, maybe they’re caught in the mouth and tail of eternity, maybe time is a cycle they're doomed to repeat, and maybe Hannibal’s hope has learned bounds.)

“Why does he love me?” he asks without looking, letting his blood pool in the palms of his hands, spilling into the soapy water as he sets the broken shards aside.

Bedelia hums, perched in Hannibal’s vacated seat.

“Love is of something, and that which love desires is not that which love is or has.”

“I’m a mirror. I can be everything and nothing he is or has.”

“He loves you for the fact of your pulse – your resonation and reflections. Nature, not the face you present to the world at large.”

“Soulmates?”

“Identically different halves of a whole.”

“If you didn’t love him,” Abigail says in Bedelia’s place. “It wouldn’t hurt.”

“I *don’t* love him.”

“Love is simply the name for the desire and pursuit of the whole,” they both say.

(And maybe he’s learned helplessness with longing, maybe acceptance is the only sanity his mind can offer, after years without fuel for hope. Maybe, just maybe, the facts of their pulse are identically different across time: twin drops and twin ripples, an ache with no cure.)

(*I’ve never known myself as well as I know myself when I’m with him.*)

You’re being obstinate, Chiyoh would say, were she here to see this.

And perhaps he is blinding himself to alternative paths, caught on the train tracks of dissatisfaction and wounded pride. It’s simpler, letting emotions coast over him and barring entrance to Will’s need to understand, absorb, decipher. Not better, but simpler.

Will’s work schedule is normally regulated solely to weekdays. The repair work comes after weekend getaways down the Dardanelles; the ancient Sea of Helle (a different Icarus, his mind can’t help but recall, saved by Poseidon’s mercy after a fall). Will’s work is normally *only* weekdays, but he finds repairs to do, rations the work to give him an escape that Hannibal resents.

It’s harder, the second time, to take the spare car to downtown Çanakkale and take himself up to Ulysses’ hotel room. He tells himself it’s anticipation, or boredom, or a desire to explore the city more thoroughly, but he knows it’s none of those things.

Love, smuggled through erected walls meant to fortify and protect. Destruction, coiled and venomous, lying in wait just within.

He sees the proverbial Trojan Horse and wills it to turn to ash.

He goes to Ulysses instead, because at least the hollowness is an aftermath of release and satisfaction, rather than more destruction. If he is a cyclical being, he tires of it. Three years of limbo, and years before it of predictable games and traps.

He loves in a way his whole being burns with, but he feels charred. Change wrought upon him by Will’s design, but there’s no beauty found in it. Longing, yearning, a poet’s words and a painter’s imagery.

Ulysses makes a decent canvas, responsive and eager and desperate enough to drown out some of the thoughts intruding, to numb the cracking floors, to draw attention from the fissure in walls throughout his foyer. Quick and clever and macabre enough to hold some fraction of interest in Hannibal. It doesn’t allow for repair; much like Troy, there’s only so many repairs to be done, when holes and gaps begin to number rooms and halls.

Because there are things his protégé wants that Hannibal can’t offer. Ulysses wants to kill with him, to make art and hold a feast after the elevation.

And Hannibal can only think of Will's hungry, rabid eyes as they circled the Great Red Dragon. Hannibal can only think of the black glint of blood in the moonlight, the way it decorated his skin better than silk and pearls ever could. Hannibal can only think of ship-on-the-bottle aftershave mingled with desire and dragon blood: full of ecstasy and ephemeral plans for a future they'd both delight in.

(Hannibal thinks of tolerance, in Will's absence. He doesn't yet know if delight is an option, after he felt his soul stitched with Will's, before Will tried to kill them as a final attempt at separation.)

(Hannibal thinks of Will in the hallway, cheek pressed to his door, the way his scent would linger for a day or two, and how Hannibal would feel the burn of his outline in his arms for weeks after carrying him to bed and tucking him in.)

As he prepares dinner, he hears the careful slide of wheels on his imported tile floors. With a sigh, he turns around.

The world shifts around him, like sand dunes caught in blasts of wind, and he's in Baltimore, at his kitchen counter with Abel Gideon's clay-roasted thigh in the oven, and Abel watching him with no small measure of curiosity.

"What interesting dinner companions you have now," Abel drawls. "Does he whet your appetite and satiate your infernal needs?"

"Not so much needs, as wants," Hannibal answers evenly as his knuckles flex around the blade. After a pause, he smiles, and feels himself begin to chop the animal intestines (actual animal, lamb in fact) for his version of *Kokoretsi* .

"And want you do. What do devils want?"

"To sum it in so few words?"

"Insatiability and reasonability war in you, as in all *beasts* eager to feast."

Hannibal lines the chunks of meat in the large pan, drizzling lemon juice and fresh olive oil over them in preparation to flambé.

"Reasonability wins out. The will of the ego, domineering over the Id's urges."

"Freudian psychology. Funny guy, Freud. Said homosexuality came from an *anal* fixation, but yours is more…" Abel pauses, swirling the words around his mouth like aerated wine. "...*Oral*, isn't it?"

"Crude," Hannibal admonishes, but he's not quite so far gone to not know it's his words through a familiar face: the dying breaths of his compartmentalization where Will Graham is concerned.

"But not entirely inaccurate. You're using suckling lamb. Sacrificial, or innocent?"

“Innocence can be sacrificed.”

“Was Abigail innocent?”

“Of crimes against me, yes.”

“The trials and tribulations have passed,” Abel says, amused. “Like the Romans, you crucified the lamb before the eyes of God. Does the moon still give light, or is it lost in God’s fury?”

“Much is lost in God’s fury, the Earth shakes with it, trembles as Heaven itself changes.”

Hannibal flicks his wrist as the tender meat catches fire, shifting it until the aroma of spices and char rises and Abel’s voice almost fades away, almost evaporating as sands shift between here and Baltimore in the midst of his mind’s indecision.

“Freud was a heretic too. ‘An infantile need for a father figure,’ he called God. Human attempts to control human impulse: the allure of violence’s ticking pulse. Does your God have your violence chained?”

Hannibal doesn’t answer, turning from his dish.

“God is all powerful. He offers us freewill, cognizant of agency and nature.”

“My wife burned the turkey. I was sitting there, eating the charred bird, and I remembered my impulses. They weren’t tamed. And her parents wouldn’t stop *screaming*, so I shut them up too. More convenient than a snow-cold divorce.”

(*Goodbye, Hannibal*.)

“Your company *is* Will Graham, the if only has *become* the only. Does this one share your appetite, I wonder?” Abel ponders.

His visage disintegrates and reality returns as the scent of burning meat fills the kitchen. Baltimore fades away as the charred husk of a meal offends his senses, and he curses himself and Abel Gideon for it.

I haven’t burned meat since the first time I attempted to flambé, he thinks. Will’s dog, drawn to the borders of the kitchen by the smell, wags its tail happily when Hannibal makes eye contact with it.

As much as he resents it for aiding Will’s downward spiral into his hateful pursuit of self-delusion, he resents wasting food more.

With a sigh, he tips the charred meat into its bowl, accepting the affectionate lick with only a modicum of annoyance. Truly, it’s not the creature’s fault that it had not been part of his original vision, years before. Will’s previous dogs had been perfectly trained. Winston, in particular, had been ideal for a life in Europe, should Will wish to bring a dog. This one, despite being trained, is not trained the same.

Will's aims, beyond comfort, had been annoying Hannibal. As most of his actions have aimed to, recently.

Hannibal shelves that line of thinking in his office, right beneath a collapsed bookshelf full of burned notes on patients of interest. With a calming breath, he reassembles the ingredients he'd burned, and makes the dish once more.

Hannibal smells the new dog before he sees it: wet notes of sulfur, feces, and mushrooms. Next comes the tell-tale click of claws on his tile floors, and Will's aftershave mixed with salt and night air.

Hannibal sighs, finishes his platings and sets them in the dining room before turning to look at Will.

"Will," Hannibal says calmly. "Why is there another dog in the dining room, dragging mud onto my imported tile?"

"*Our* imported tile," Will corrects smugly. "You dragged me here, so it's ours."

Hannibal tilts his head slightly, watching Will through his bangs as he pours the wine.

"You can leave." He makes a sweeping gesture to the door. "I have given you cards with more than enough money to support yourself. You have false identities, and Michael is not wanted for anything in this life."

"I don't *have* anywhere else to go."

There's a faint buzz in the air, and Hannibal's lightheaded as though he's missed a few meals. He's grown bored of Will's lies, to himself, to Hannibal, to the play family found and accepted like Hannibal and Abigail and everything they'd meant to build had meant nothing, had been so easily replaceable.

So easily forgotten, love gone sour three years past the expiration date.

"There's the wife, and the *child*. Or you can find a new *cunt* to hide yourself in."

His teeth click around the word, the flick of safety on a gun. Will's eyes burn in response; cyan flames offering damnation.

"*Don't* talk about Molly like that."

Hannibal huffs a laugh. Molly. Such a banal name. He imagines the next will be a Madison, or Anna. Perhaps even an ever-so adventurous *Jane*.

"Guilty conscience?"

"Why do you keep pushing me away?"

“'Pushing you away' bears the implication you ever allowed closeness,” Hannibal says, swirling the glass of wine.

“Didn’t I?”

“No. Not truly. Who’s to say how much of the you I see is shaped by reality more than melding minds and the whispers I offered in the past? That you’ve ever been accurate to my perception?”

“You saw me on the cliff,” Will reminds him, but Hannibal had seen him in the stable with Peter and his social worker, he’d seen Will in the aftermath of Randall Tier, he’d seen Will when they’d cooked together and feasted as equals.

Sight is not a sense to be trusted, where Will Graham is concerned.

“I saw what I wished to see, before you pulled us over in a final escape attempt.”

“I was…afraid.”

“You’ve always been afraid, Will,” Hannibal says, fingers interlocked beneath his chin as he waits for the scorn to strike with scorpion precision. “Strange, the way fear manifests with one you’d proclaim to allow closeness.”

Will’s face wrinkles, and it’s the snarling protests that it always is, knives and false forgiveness, poisonous past never to leave, never to repair.

“You *gutted* me.”

“You betrayed me.”

“You let my mind *burn*.”

“You manipulated me into turning myself in.”

*“You tried to **eat my brain**!”*

“And you broke my heart,” Hannibal says quietly. Will’s eyes widen, shifting from brimstone into pure shock – because somehow, despite everything, Will forgets how Hannibal feels (has always felt). Blinders on empathy, the cruelty of voluntary ignorance. “Excuse me, I believe I’ve lost my appetite. Enjoy it in my absence, will you?”

(He goes where he always seems to go, lately, lets Ulysses’ body and mouth distract him with blood and pain and sex and madness, whispered promises of murder and ruin and art.

A part of Hannibal wants this companionship, craves it after three years without.

Most of him knows he’ll only be satisfied with Will.

All of him is tired.)

Will eats his dinner reluctantly, knowing half the flavors and intricacies of this dish are lost on him without Hannibal's typical monologue on history, preparation, and descriptions of flavor notes as well as what wine he'd paired with it, this time. It doesn't help that he's distracted, mastication a background activity as he chews, and drinks, and thinks.

This is the closest to a verbal confession Hannibal's offered, since their fall. He's never said so much in words, preferring to distill Hannibal's feelings that Will had begun to doubt ever existed through a series of filters until they were rendered incomprehensible.

Achilles and Patroclus, rather than a confession or plea.

(*I know*, Hannibal said without saying. *I can forgive you. I will forgive you. I just want you to come with me more than I want to kill Jack.*)

A notebook full of scrawled prayers, rather than an apology or admission of guilt.

(*I regret it. I wish I hadn't. I wish we hadn't hurt each other, and that things were different.*)

Supplication in between banks of snow, hours of waiting and waiting.

(*I can't forget you, so I won't let you forget me. I can't let go. I won't let go. I'd rather sit in the very place I sent you in hopes of appeasement than languish in Europe without pervading your thoughts.*)

Three years of patience. Two years of silence.

(*I gave you a child.*)

(*Is there any point?*)

(*Think about me, Will, don't worry about me.*)

(*This is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us.*)

Never voiced, always danced around, always shown in actions and inaction, in between the tangled lines of dialogue and metaphor Hannibal weaves through the world.

They've been alone for months now. Snapping at each other's neck, waiting to taste blood. This is the first time Hannibal's demonstrated something other than bitterness, mistrust, and a not entirely unfounded level of suspicion regarding Will's commitment to their new life here.

The soft verbalization is profound, sharp for all that it isn't. Hannibal's quick exit, keys in hand to a car Will's seen him use a few times, sets off alarm bells, but he's too stunned by Hannibal's words to react, to call for Hannibal to stay.

You broke my heart.

And he had, hadn't he? Hadn't he known, to some extent, the nature of Hannibal's regard for him when he came upon the twisted, skinned heart? When Hannibal said *I would remember this time* with a fond smile, and looked at Will like Will was the stars and the sky wrapped around his world? When he'd said *I need you. Hannibal* like a tease, when he'd watched Hannibal fall to the ground and found himself unable to see?

It's one thing to know vaguely, to know with the certainty of smoke, and another to have it communicated in such a way that cannot be misinterpreted.

Sure, Hannibal had said something along the lines of leaving his heart in Palermo, but the heart does not always refer to *eros*. *Philia* or *pragma* would've been the words he'd assign that heart, the broken beat of affection and resentment Will had felt as the stag died along with Abigail. Will hadn't conceptualized it this way consciously, perhaps on purpose. Somehow, whatever forts Hannibal hadn't smashed through had protected him from this shade of revelation.

This particular realization.

You broke my heart.

Hannibal *had* offered mercy, despite everything. Had offered for them to leave, together. Even betrayed, hurt, and angry, he'd tried.

A part of Will, a resentful, cold part of him that'd burst forth from the BSHCI and shoved a gun against Hannibal's temple, settles. Hannibal hadn't intended to kill Abigail, no. Will can see his design clearly – an Addam's Family with bonds of murder rather than blood – and Will can see how it shifted, changed, when Will came to the kitchen with a gun, and Hannibal felt the reality of it all crash down on him like Atlas with his immortal burden.

Will closes his eyes, and lets himself slip into that shadowed headspace, feeling the keen sting of rejection, and letting the agony of being known and being used wash over him in waves.

His monster had never felt such things, almost childlike in his pain. He'd wanted it to stop, at any cost, and he'd thought hurting Will would fix it. That *punishing* him would feel righteous – the wrathful hand of God – but Hannibal had unknowingly converted to a different deity, and the typical blood and body offerings weren't satisfactory. A murder *felt* like murder.

The promise of delayed gratification in emotional release had been numbing, a topical agent applied before a surgical extraction, but Will's words had cut through it, and they'd all paid the price.

(*I already did*, he'd said, smiling through gritted teeth as he held himself together after Hannibal tore him apart. And he can feel the shift, in retrospect, the moment Hannibal loses that precious strand of control, eyes cutting to Abigail and hoping Will isn't right.

And Will hates him for it, hates him for Abigail's death, but he's spent so long hating Hannibal that it's not an emotion so much as a background sensation – the grass at the feet of the Great Wall, the cobblestone before the Eiffel Tower – because hate's intertwined in their bond, their connection, and it's just noise and static made of corpses and love, and Will knows part of Hannibal hates him too, hates the way he makes Hannibal feel, and it's enough for him to feel some semblance of sympathy.

Of compassion.

He hadn't known what to do with someone he'd felt enough about to want to kill, either.)

"And how do we feel about that?" he asks himself, watching the ice cubes tip and slide in his glass of whiskey, swirling the amber liquid back and forth.

He doesn't need Bedelia's visage, to ask.

Will's starting to realize he already knows.

A part of him, maybe, has always known.

He waits for Hannibal, waits to talk, to correct whatever downward spiral they're charted for, but his monster doesn't come home that night.

Will sits alone, the ashes of Achilles and Patroclus in the fireplace, and Hannibal doesn't come back.

Hannibal gives himself the night to adjust his mind.

Part of him craves solitude, craves the thrill of a hunt, of screams that stop with a faltering heart, but he's not yet willing to court the authorities, nor announce his living status.

Easier to hurt a willing body, than one less yielding.

Satisfaction doesn't hurt, after all, inoffensive and pleasant like Renaissance-era art. Nothing ventured, nothing lost.

Will wouldn't care, even if he *did* know, but the thought of it hurting him is, admittedly, part of his motivations in fostering this old expired bond from his past life.

"Where'd you drift to, mon chérie?" Ulysses purrs, pulling his mouth off of Hannibal's cock with a wet pop. Ulysses licks his lip at Hannibal's pensive silence, smirking slightly.

“Thinking, again?”

Hannibal mirrors the expression as Ulysses climbs up his body, light nips pressed at the various scars left by others. Hannibal’s fingers tangle in Ulysses’ hair, breath hitching as teeth scrape over his nipple. Ulysses pauses at that, looks at Hannibal with knowing, wanting eyes, and bites down *hard*.

Hannibal can’t bite back the moan, it escapes his throat without conscious thought, the right side of pleasure-pain. Ulysses rocks against him, body flush against his own while his teeth dig in deeper, leaving imprints Hannibal wouldn’t be able to hide in nudity.

He pulls Ulysses so they’re face to face and crushes their mouths together without any of his typical patience, craving the now familiar coppery heat of blood and breath muddled with desire. Ulysses’ taste is familiar too – a blend of Hannibal’s blood and come with the citrus aftermath of champagne bubbling on their tongues – the afterimage Will Graham had never intended to leave, because that’s all this is, at the end of the day.

“You taste divine,” Hannibal says, lips sampling the thin salt-sheen Ulysses’ skin has adopted, the reopened wounds he’d let Hannibal carve in him again, just a few minutes ago.

Ulysses’s cock aligns with his as they shift, delightful friction as he breaks skin again along his companion’s neck over a just-healed bruise that still aches to the touch. It hurts Ulysses, clenched teeth and fingers tightening around gripped flesh, and it just makes Hannibal crave *more*. More of this artificial high, more clarity from Will’s slipstream presence.

“You… *look* divine,” Ulysses says, eyes fluttering shut.

Hannibal finds a decent rhythm, but finds his perspective limited, so he flips them down, fingers dancing around his companion’s throat as they both bleed.

“Not as a muse, I hope,” Hannibal teases, fingers tapping the slip column he could crush, should he so wish. Ulysses knows too, allowing this control still. It makes it more intoxicating, this small hint of sight not blind nor resented. Not Will’s singular and reflected understanding, but enough. Agreeable.

(He hesitates to use the word *acceptable*, because he’s not sure what *is* acceptable anymore, not with how he’s changed and been changed in turn.)

Ulysses’s chokes out a laugh, pressing into Hannibal’s grip with the same eagerness he presses into Hannibal’s cock.

“If anyone were to be a muse,” he says warmly, a lover’s intimacy as his nails scratch at the brand stamped across Hannibal’s back, “it would be me to your appetite.”

“My feasting of your flesh is, for this moment, entirely metaphorically and intrinsically carnal.”

“It’s all carnal when it comes to you. Be it final or *la petite mort,*” Ulysses says wickedly, eyes intoxicating swirls of macabre designs and mischief. “I'm certain I’ll find satisfaction

either way, on your tongue or in your belly."

"Satisfaction comes with obedience, *mio Odisseo.* "

"I'll be satisfied," Ulysses says, arching his neck as he wraps a hand around their cocks from beneath Hannibal and begins to stroke. "When you're inside me once more."

"Earn it." and Hannibal's grip on the throat tightens, head tilted as Ulysses' inhales sharply.

A squeeze, hard enough to bruise, and Ulysses settles obediently, body malleable to Hannibal's conducting as he's made a canvas and instrument. He's mindful of time as he applies pressure, watching skin bruises bloom under his violent caress.

(Will's skin would blossom under pressure, the full beauty of Eden's gardens as Hannibal tracked a blood-red flush down to the source.

The image is there before Hannibal can shift scenes, before he can alter the script and redirect his mind into what is real over what will only ever be imagination.

Will Graham, with pomegranate lips and ambrosia hips pressed beneath him, his teasing grin at the grip on his throat, *his* eager submission with the promise of later consequences.)

His grip tightens, and it's too much, so he lets go.

(Hannibal's beginning to wonder if *letting go* is all this life has left him to do.)

"Please," Ulysses says, the tan skin of his throat painted in violent red fingerprints. His throat's a bit hoarse, air taken in gratefully as Hannibal watches. "Aren't I always so good for you?"

"Is it really good behavior when you delight in it as much as you do, or is it mutually assured satisfaction?"

Ulysses ruts against him, letting out a frustrated sigh when Hannibal pins his hips in a bruising grip, hovering just out of reach.

"Better than mutually assured destruction, or isn't that what you've called my other offers?"

"Tiring of this form of entertainment?"

"Not in the slightest, *docteur*. I'm simply eager to see you stripped of all this normalcy, in your element, bared before me."

"Have I not been *bare* before you already?" Hannibal asks, amused.

"Not in the moonlight with crimson paint and mundane canvases turned divine, no. Whatever shall I do to convince you?"

"How about I put your mouth to use, while you think on it?"

Ulysses hums, pleased, and when Hannibal places himself in that mouth, he can almost pretend it's enough.

That it's satisfactory.

Fucking into a face that'd been mere entertainment, as a distraction, as an affair. Wringing tension from his body through a less dangerous form of violence, a less intimate intimacy.

(But as that talented mouth drags along his cock, as teeth tease and Ulysses does something truly talented with his tongue, it's not Ulysses pictured, it's not his low-timbre with a French-Canadian drawl, not his art flashing through his mind, not his body Hannibal dreams of crawling into and finding a home in.

It's Will's, always Will's form, Will's willing body, his love, his soul, his monster. Ghosting through breaking walls, mocking memories and affections, delighting in agony and tolerating pleasure. Cruel and vicious and too lovely to look at too long: Zeus, stripped of humanity before Semele. It hurts, a beautiful death.)

As he comes, he bites himself to muffle the sound.

It tastes like copper and ashes: dead potential dragged through three years that have amounted to nothing, in the end.

It tastes like most things in this life do: the soured sweetness of what could've been.

He comes in at half past four am, indecently ruffled with bruises and bitemarks and the fairly obvious look of a man who had sex recently. To his disappointment, Will's asleep in his chair by the fireplace, Hannibal's sketchbook across his lap, and a bottle of whiskey, half empty, tipped on the floor.

Hannibal picks the bottle up with a tsk, placing it back in their liquor cabinet, before moving to grab his sketchbook.

Frowning, he notices Will's fingers curled around a particular page, the front cover sandwiching them in the pages. Pulling it from Will's grasp slowly, he looks.

It's an image as tantalizing as it is tortuous, engraved in a mural in the rooms Will's claimed as his and his alone: blood, black in the moonlight, splashed across the jaw and chest of a hunched over predator.

Their final moment of perfect cohesion, the dying proof of Aristophanes' godly claims.

It hurts in hindsight, another scar unseen.

He tucks the sketchbook away where it won't be found, and places a blanket over Will gently.

"To be or not to be," Abigail says in the forced worldly tones Fredrick would sometimes adopt (unironically, of course). "That is the question."

Hannibal stills, stiff and off-kilter, bent over Will Graham.

Abigail Hobbs is dead, placed somewhere out of sight and mind, a place where he leaves regrets to grow and rot like weeds without competition. Abigail is dead, but when he turns around, it's the house on the bluff, she's in a pretty blue dress that matches her eyes, and they're talking like he wishes they had before sentiment overcame rationality in the wrong way, the way he can't delight in.

"Suicide is the enemy."

"And yet I found home in it."

Hannibal can't shut her out, can't force her into a field of flowers with Mischa, can't push her back into whatever hole she's crawled from, can't paste over the cracks left in her wake, in her appearance.

It's as close to a panic as he's felt, since waking up and not seeing Will at his side.

"Breathe," she tells him fondly, the memory of her warmth pressed against his chest in some sad attempt at self-comfort. His eyes stay shut, as he tries to count, to solidify reality in the here and now rather than teacups lost to time. "You need to breathe, Hannibal."

Stupid, to take comfort in this. In delusions, breaks in marble and mosaic, cracks in wood panelings and Byzantine art.

"Hannibal," she says, and it's soft, as she cups his cheek – no, she *doesn't* cup his cheek - as he recalls some memory lost to destruction and can't help but- "Open your eyes, please."

He opens them, and they're in the Normal Chapel. Discarded shards of mosaic glass litter the foyer, the Byzantine face of God is smeared with viscera and gore, and the pews are populated with the dead eyed faces of his family.

He curses, feels the vulgarities slip out without intention, and he *hates* it.

Abigail's specter draws his attention, forcefully moving his chin until he's looking away from the bodies of his mother and father and back in her stark blue eyes.

"You need to make a choice, Hannibal, and it needs to stick."

"There's not a choice to make," he says. "The die is already cast. I am awaiting the fallout."

"He could love you, you know. Freud said people instinctively choose life or death, in decisions. Thanatos or Eros."

"Freud was a cocaine addict and had a vulgar obsession with children's sexuality."

She shrugs at him.

"You're the one thinking it. Maybe it's because your mind isn't exactly in tip-top shape."

The wreckage touches everything, hallways splintering off into *il Mostro* memories and medical school caved in, stairs leading to Baltimore and his years as a psychiatrist have gaps where he'd fall easily, and the descending elevator to his basement of tableaus and art of all kinds gives an unreliable jittery sound.

"Eros was the god of carnal love, as well as Freud's so-called drive for life."

"You're capable of more drive than Thanatos, external or internal."

"Life and love full of lies," Hannibal murmurs. "Is there any point? Was there ever?"

Abigail's smile fades, widening on her throat instead.

"I wouldn't know," she says. "I never lived."

"Private, polite goodbyes should've been suitable. It was…dissatisfactory, to leave the way I did."

"I chose it," Abigail says, smiling so wide it bleeds into the dress she'd never worn, one he'd imagined her wearing at an opera. "I walked willingly to my death. That choice was mine, not yours."

"A different choice could have been made."

"The die was cast the moment Will came into the kitchen. The way it landed is the way it always would have, for us. You have to cast this die, Hannibal, and you need to know what you want when you do."

"What I want is of another universe. He tried to kill us, rather than accept himself and accept how our wholeness feels."

"Familiar emptiness or growing pains of four arms and four legs."

"Learned helplessness or an out of character admission."

"You're not helpless, Hannibal." Abigail says, leading him to the very valentine he'd broken and left in Palermo.

It twitches and throbs violently, feral motions that make him want to take a step back, to regroup, to look away.

It's uglier than he'd made it, and Abigail's grip is unyielding. It bleeds as he watches, tattoo trails of vulnerability as he imagines Will seeing any of this through his gift, through his understanding.

"You've never been helpless. The only thing you've learned is fear."

As Hannibal swallows, the macabre display vaporizes, his lost daughter disappears, and reality shifts to his sketchbook of desires not to be and the love of his life that's never wholly shared his appetite.

His mind is not his own, but that does not mean it can't be again.

Hannibal resolves to renew the meditative rituals his aunt had once shown him, the very ones he'd used to center his disorganized thoughts enough to form words, to repress the unneeded, to craft his Memory Palace on crisp, clean foundations rather than the ugliness of starvation.

Control, that's the key. Hannibal's control is shifting, three years out of practice, not self-contained enough, too used to picking at suit seams to frustrate Frederick, to leer at Alana, to avoid thinking of who he's still avoiding thinking about.

(Too accustomed to a state of something akin to nudity, the weaponized weakness of a stripped wire, able to hurt but not without hurting in turn. Two-fold pain, and that had been enough, for three years, because what else had there been for him, without Will? Without being seen the way he'd come to crave like an addict longing for needle-sharp affection, like an alcoholic waiting for the next brown bottle of fatal temptation? It's pathetic, weak, beneath the him he'd once been, a whole being unconcerned with Plato's view on souls split by divine cruelty. But it's not a break that can be repaired, not a break that can be repaired by teacup dreams and entropic reversals never to be.

He was one, and now he's halved by the torch he'd been forced to carry by some force beyond man's understanding. A sky he never meant to shoulder, entranced by blue-eyed intelligence and Botticelli curls, by madness and loveliness and all the possibilities he'd never dared to consider.)

Abigail's parting touch lingers like the branded memory of her in his arms, choking on run-out-time and dead dreams.

(He can't throw the corpse of hope away, this time, it's not surgical, it's not clean, and the three of them are all bleeding every which way – a killing floor of love.)

Will wakes alone to bright rays of daylight peeking through the living room curtains, mouth full of cotton and the faint taste of whiskey. There's a blanket draped over him, one that hadn't been there when he slipped into unconsciousness between Hannibal's departure and now, which gives him some semblance of hope.

Sure, he wishes Hannibal had woken him, had been willing to discuss it, the confession, their fall, their fights, *any of it*, but this is something. A silent act of affection, not some grand manipulation or duplicitous tenderness. It's tucking him into bed at Wolf Trap. It's washing his hands of Randall Tier. It's wrapping a blanket around his trembling shoulders.

(It's Hannibal turning his back to the sea, to the glass, taking the bullet and taking the blunt force of the fall.

It's Hannibal, on his knees in the snow, looking at Will like the sight alone can sustain him.

It's Hannibal, cutting lamb, begging Will to not make it a sacrificial dish.

It's love, as hunger, as an ache, like Bedelia said.

Because Hannibal's in love with him, and they're both here starving.)

"I want to talk," Will says, when he manages to track Hannibal to the second floor study they rarely use.

Hannibal doesn't look at him, but gives away his awareness in the straightening of his spine, the way his mouth sets in a plastic expression, faux-confidence.

Will steps closer to Hannibal and reaches out with his gift, letting the dark tendrils be felt and understood as he's taken in and takes in cyclically.

Hannibal's on edge and angry, Will's not quite sure what about, if it's everything or one thing, but behind that is something unfamiliar, something layered and buried: something like guilt.

"Please," he says, because Hannibal's surrender is guaranteed from the moment he voices it like that. The power is heady, but he maintains focus on Hannibal. Feels the thrum of helplessness run through him, the slip of longing, the tangled beast of association that leads to.

Hannibal still does not look at Will directly, sketching on the paper something Will can't yet make out.

"What is it you wish to speak of?"

Will opens his mouth, ready to communicate the way any normal therapist he probably should have gone to instead of Bedelia and Hannibal would have suggested, but what looks like bruises half-covered by the collar of Hannibal's dress shirt catch his eyes.

All thoughts of healthy communication and admissions that are probably three years due die, asphyxiate at the back of his throat as he steps closer and watches the way Hannibal's maroon eyes glint in sunlight, the way the lighter strands of his graying hair catch and glimmer like spun strands of gold.

Because there are other things too, now that he's looking for them: exhaustion mixed with unease in dark depths Will could lose himself in – *has* lost himself in - the bruised swelling of Hannibal's lips, and (when Will is close enough to be standing over Hannibal like an executioner) the foreign scent of something like cinnamon.

It's a mark Hannibal's mouth alone couldn't have left. It's a wound Hannibal's lips couldn't have self-inflicted. It's a scent Hannibal would die before procuring and wearing like the common man that buys cologne at Walmart and grew up using Axe body spray.

(and Hannibal stiffens when he's close enough to see goosebumps, his breath cascading over the bruises he hadn't left on Hannibal, the damage *he* hadn't been the one to inflict. Hannibal

stiffens, and Will wants to throttle him, or rip out his rib cage and wear it as a fucking hat, because–

“Where did you go last night?” Will asks, clenching his fists to keep what feels an awful lot like *jealousy* from creeping into his voice.

Hannibal does look at him, a flicker of interest as he scans Will over.

“Was that the question you intended, when you entered my study?”

“I asked a question. Now *answer* it.”

Hannibal’s lips twist; the contortion of broken flesh, an echo of a valentine on a potential man.

“How did you see me, Will, amidst a land of ghosts, with Garret Jacob Hobbs as your Virgil?”

Will whets his teeth, and thinks of the bottomless pit he’d seen in the moonlight, reflected in Hannibal’s dark eyes.

“A wendigo, with skin made of madness and antlers crafted from bone.”

“Traditionally, wendigos do not bear antlers. In the rolling seas of the Great Lakes, and among the First Nations of Canada, they are often depicted as malevolent humanoids, on occasion large beings with hearts of ice. Fitting, for your feverish mind to see me as a creature born of sin, associated with winter and starvation. One becomes a wendigo by the tabooed sustainment of life with human flesh, or prolonged exposure to a wendigo.”

Hannibal’s drawing, when Will glances down at it, is another man, in his place: Achilles lamenting the loss of potential.

“A wendigo’s presence is preceded by a chill felt down to the marrow of one’s bones, and is greeted by an insatiable hunger for murder and flesh. There’s a cultural condition, bearing its name: wendigo psychosis. For fear of being too transparent, I shan’t question if you believe yourself to meet the parameters. After all, you don’t have my appetite.”

A bitter smile stretches Will’s mouth, a syrupy sweetness not unlike sickness.

“Your presence is corrupting, but not the sole culprit. I have my own darkness. I’ve accepted you were not the be all, end of my *Becoming*. But that,” Will says, stepping in front of Hannibal until he’s daring the man to meet his eyes, “still doesn’t *answer* my question. I’ve answered yours.”

“Reciprocity?”

“Only polite,” through clenched teeth.

“I was out, acquainting myself with the streets of Çanakkale and her people.”

“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men,” Will quips acerbically.

“I’m not certain what, if anything, will put us together again. Time does not reverse, the laws of the universe are quite clear on that. In the city center, not far from the ruins of a once great city, a horse sits tall and ominous: Pandora’s *pithos* for the standing Trojans, packaged in the very symbol they’d held sacred.

The Greeks used their sympathies against them, after Achilles’ death and the loss of Patroclus. Greek myths often warn of such things, curiosity and sentiment. For someone who’s read of the interfering gods and the mistakes of those who’d climbed the height of Mount Olympus only to fall to Hades, it is truly a shining example of dramatic irony.”

“That’s not the whole truth,” Will accuses, sensing Hannibal’s obfuscation for what it is, dancing with words to an operatic cadence at the height of his *aria*. Always the damn showman. “You met with someone. *Who?*”

“The wrong question, dear Will,” Hannibal purrs, shading the contours of his valentine’s features. Will can’t help but notice the similarities, the parallels, and wonders if there had been some type of catharsis in breaking down a man that looked like Will, knowing it wasn’t a permanent end Hannibal would find intolerable.

“You’re playing games, Hannibal.”

“As are you, playing the lamb and playing the wolf. Uncommitted. Indecisive and mercurial as you’ve always been.”

“I *left* with you. I *stayed* with you.”

“A *pis aller*, caught in darkness and unwilling to *taint* your little wife and child.”

“No,” Will says, shaking his finger at Hannibal, “we’re not doing the whole you piss me off and I dredge up the past to piss you off thing.”

“Breaking from script?” Hannibal looks back at him, skepticism thick and offensive, “How original of you.”

“*What* is the person you met up with? The person you–”

“*–fucked?* ” the word is wrong, in Hannibal’s mouth, related to someone else, as wrong as it had sounded the only other instance he’d heard it from. “Potential.”

Hannibal stands, brushing the nonexistent dirt and wrinkles from his impeccable suit, and pausing in the hall to call back at Will.

“I’ll prepare lunch, should you wish to eat.”

“And if I don’t wish?”

Teeth, sharp teeth, pointed canines that could rip him open, that Will might let rip him open, for the chance to do it in turn. To build himself a home between arteries and veins, in the

slick linings of Hannibal's innards, a place where no lies could be told and a place where Bedelia hadn't crawled into and made a mockery of in books and prosaic prattle as meaningless as Chilton's therapy.

"I'm not your keeper, nor your warden, Will. I won't be that."

Satisfied? Bedelia asks from Hannibal's desk, lips curled at the ends like devil horns from a Christian depiction.

Will shut his eyes, and pictures ripping her tongue from her mouth with his teeth, pictures feeding it to Hannibal, feeding the entirety of Bedelia to Hannibal, except for her *purposeful parts* and her treacherous lips.

Her hands…those he'd cut off and place in a fucking jar, for touching that which wasn't hers, for opening the veil when it hadn't been *hers* to peer behind, for pretending to be anything more than cattle stock and entertainment and *daring* to play Hannibal's bride – Bluebeard or other.

"Shut the fuck up," he snaps, and he doesn't care if Hannibal hears it.

Hannibal knows, with some certainty, that this won't last. Whatever equilibrium their mutual avoidance has established is falling prey to disorder, to Will's desire to talk and Hannibal's desire to never speak again.

There will be a push back, a reactionary shift, because there always is.

He'd managed to provoke a reaction from Will's callousness (beyond *bitchy* retorts and flat-out lies), the territorial reaction of a cougar or wolf, hackles raised and teeth bared at a perceived threat (as though there's any right to such a claim, three years gone and another year to recovery), and he'd obtained some semblance of satisfaction with it, but it's hollow.

Everything is hollow, echoing around the caverns of his mind, trotting through the wreckage of the old and the new.

The Norman Chapel has stood for eight centuries, beautiful and lasting despite all the change the world brought.

Hannibal's Memory Palace, in its completed state, has stood for three decades. He'd expected it to last his whole life, yet here he is in its wreckage, forced down paths meant to be holes, searching for some meaning in *ouroboros* once more.

Abigail, free from the sanctity of his past. Others, wandering the halls as unwanted guests.

(He is not like the city of Troy, *they* are not like the city of Troy, nine-times destroyed, nine-time rebuilt: Hannibal doubts there's a foundation left to build upon once more, with all the

ashes they've cast and all the ruins they've made from people and places that could've been home.

From the lives they could have shared, the daughter they both lost at the other's betrayal.

Patroclus never wore Achilles armor, because his Patroclus was never loyal. Patroclus never wore Achilles armor, because he'd come under the cloak of Agamemnon and the scent of lies. Patroclus never wore Achilles armor, because they aren't lovers.

This isn't a myth of religious grandeur, this isn't a tale with joy written in, be it past or present. Their tale is one of a different intimacy, cut from a different shade of love. Crueler, colder, obsessive and duplicitous and destructive.

The twisting vines of thorned roses, the promised pain of death by love, for love, because of love.

Hannibal's not breathing so much as living between breaths, waiting for an expiration date. Waiting for cliffside mercy, waiting for pointed forgiveness by knife.)

"Martyr's Day is approaching," he says to Will on the way out, avoiding eye contact, "should you wish to wallow in self-castigation once more."

Will has cruelty perched in his throat, indignation in the crinkled humanity of his face that Hannibal can read like a book, but Hannibal's already leaving, always leaving, and he doesn't know if there is anything to stay for.

(He's uncertain if there ever was.)

Sex is enough to clear his mind, between moments. When he makes Ulysses hurt enough to twitch, to *react* in some measurable way other than blind pleasure. The afterglow is nonexistent, painted in strokes of repressed guilt and embittered satisfaction, but he allows Ulysses an indulgence, staying in bed beside the man, not recoiling from his touch when it's gentler than desired.

Ulysses has been requesting his presence at his next art acquisition for the last several weeks, desiring Hannibal's thoughts, his company, his willing hand.

(*This is all I wanted for you, Will*, but what's left after the climax? He could compose a piece to honor their bond, but the notes would always slip away in streams of river water. He could write a poem or play, but the progression would pale in comparison to the chords once struck, to the notes once paired, and the symphony that followed it.

It'd been all he'd wanted for the both of them, before Will hurled them off the cliff in an act of mercy. He wants more, now, wants things he can't voice, rattling around his bones and internal cavities like echoed prayers and hymns.

And what had his imprisonment been, if not a three year chant? Prayers a crescendo, Hannibal the devout worshiper alone in a pew in Italian sunlight.

And what had Will been, if not a God dropping a church roof on thirty-four of his worshipers in Texas?

“Will you come with me?” Ulysses asks again, and there’s nothing different about it this time, nothing other than the grief that’s snuck in, nothing but the demolition of his structured separations and compartmentalizations, nothing but the fact that Will had been offended when Hannibal had affairs, almost jealous in his incandescent rage, and the simple matter of reciprocity.

(Nothing but Abigail’s lingering presence, her overbearing disapproval, her loss and his own exhaustion of zero-sum games.)

Cliffside violence must be contagious, Hannibal thinks, because he says yes in the crime-scene sheets and fucks the man again.

He doesn’t say Will’s name, but it sits in the back of his throat like bile.

It lingers; everything about Will Graham always does.

Will drugs the fucking wine because of course he does. Somehow, Hannibal doesn’t smell it. Doesn’t taste it. Doesn’t sense it. Going to bed early to avoid more fireplace conversations or burning pictures.

(Will looks, briefly, for the sketchpad he’d traced before watching his face burn, but it’s absent, gone, stolen from his sight once more, which is just another tally on the list of sins Hannibal’s committed against him.)

Stealing Hannibal’s phone is easy, aided by the fact that his password is the date of their fall. It makes Will smile, bitter as he feels. He’s still a fixed point in Hannibal’s universe, as angry as the man is. He can’t cut Will, else he would have already. He’d tried before, and it hadn’t worked.

It will never work, for either of them.

(Red strings of fate like blood vessels, tangling them together in an inescapable Gordian knot wrapped around their throats.)

Hannibal has three active text chains: an unnamed contact he rules as Chiyoh, his identity’s name with a few banal texts exchanged, and a number that had been texted earlier today, around the time when Hannibal had left their house without an explanation.

He scowls at the messages exchanged, the salacious nature of the stranger’s replies, and the faint impression he gets that not only is this a man, it’s a killer. One of Hannibal’s little pet

killers, in fact.

Named Ulysses, he finds, checking Chiyoh's text chain as well. The Latin form of Odysseus.

"You fucking bastard," he says at Hannibal's door. "*Cheating* bastard."

Their commitments are unspoken, their union unquestionable. He'd known from Hannibal's previous attempts to woo him with an all-expense-paid trip to a mental institution, a boiled brain, and a bunch of murder charges he'd almost been crucified for, that the man could be fucking *stupid*.

But this? *This?*

Bedelia's one thing, a meaningless clutch for balance in a tumultuous sea of loneliness that'd been admittedly, at least fifteen-percent Will's fault.

Alana's one thing, an alibi and convenience and petty way to get back at him for the whole murder attempt (one returned with another murder attempt, of course).

But a partner? Someone Hannibal had coaxed from a different sort of shell, someone that wants to kill with him? To hold *witness* to Will's beautiful monster?

There's no longer a question of right and wrong, of whether or not he's ready to kill once more.

He's gonna kill this son of a bitch and every other Greek or Trojan to get in his way, and then he might kill Hannibal to prove a point.

There are means of influence other than violence, Chiyoh would tell him, repeating it like that would explain a damn thing.

And yeah, there are, but he and Hannibal speak in a dialect of viscera and ichor, stolen offerings and twisted knives and all the violence one might expect from a cannibalistic serial killer and the FBI agent that chased him to Europe looking for something other than an arrest.

Maybe, when things settle, when Hannibal doesn't deny him access, when Will trusts Hannibal with a knife near his stomach, things can be different.

Until that time, Hannibal needs to remember exactly what monster he catalyzed and nurtured from its confines.

Will's more than happy to show him, one half-assed replacement at a time, until *he's* all *Hannibal* has left as well.

Hannibal knows that Will had drugged his wine, curious of what would happen if he allowed the man his victory.

He'd been surprised when the only consequence of his drugging had been the temporary confiscation of his phone, and the leveling of a dark glower that made Hannibal want to look at the sky and see if it was thundering as well.

He notices Will following him a few times. On innocent visits to fresh markets, or museums, on trips to the famous Trojan Horse or the outskirts of Troy, not yet ready to cross that particular barrier. From their fight a few days prior, he imagines Will is trying to track down Hannibal's affair, the perceived threat.

It's amusing, so he doesn't confront Will on it, allows the man his unjustified jealousy, using said amusement to drown out the uncomfortable reminder that Will always has been and always will be the one person in his life to see him and know him wholly and unflinchingly. He'd had an inkling with Tobias, when like minded company in hopes of similar pleasures paled in comparison to Will's effervescent presence, as feverish and snappy and occasionally rude as Will could be. Paired with an out-of-left-field *I kissed Alana Bloom* from the man himself, Hannibal hadn't accepted it easily, hadn't admitted to the jealousy in the confines of his mind, hadn't realized just how indispensable Will was. Even after, for the discomfiting, grieving moments between Tobias' death and Jack's arrival, it had been a muted awareness, a creeping sense of loss, not unlike walking through a grave full of familiar tombstones you once knew.

Even Randall, the very Randall he'd watched shift into his self-realized form, slinking out of the skin of a boy clinging to his mother's leg and into the predator he'd come to be before he met his end, had not been a companion he'd seen himself keeping, nor a pet he'd entertain for long.

Ulysses, in an ideal world, would be different. He'd be enough to draw Hannibal's recalcitrant, willful heart from its current and sempiternal object. He'd be enough to draw the interest of Hannibal's own monster, coiled beneath a thin layer of snakeskin, and to whet Hannibal's appetite once more from the ice-cold ocean water that had staunchly put it out, left to linger in the gaps, in bone and flesh, deeper than he's searched.

(*Another victim of my and Will's courtship*, Hannibal can't help thinking.)

Ulysses is not enough, however, because this is not Troy, and this is not an ideal world, and Hannibal's heart and mind and soul are so irrevocably intertwined with Will's that there is no extrication, no surgery, no separation, no solutions that could save them once more. For all he should, Hannibal cannot be invested in Ulysses beyond subdued flickers of interest beneath sheets of ice. His likeness does not evoke a need to put image to paper, his voice does not fill Hannibal with a need to capture his transient essence in brittle notes of a harpsichord composition, and his kills – elegant and artful as they may be – do not instill a shivering sense of euphoria that could only be captured by the trembling vibrato of a theremin.

There's pleasure and appreciation, some level of satisfaction at seeing how far Ulysses has come since Baltimore, but those feelings are shallow in nature.

And they all pale in comparison to his pleasure, watching Will watch him with lion eyes, hungry for things Hannibal can feel caged in his own chest.

It's that combination – Will, furious and jealous and enraged, Ulysses, pleasant and submissive, seeking approval on some level, and Hannibal, in love and unable to change himself the way Will changed him – that had made him accept the very offer he'd been prevaricating on the vague idea of with *later* and *soon* and any number of (reasonable) excuses, after all. Ulysses' request, offered again the night after, phrased as an invitation to a nightly adventure, articulated like a date when they've never met outside the confines of the man's hotel room.

Hannibal accepts, because he's curious to see what a territorial Will Graham might look like, in the company of other predators.

(*The only thing you've learned is fear,* Abigail reminds him, again and again, a cacophony nothing can silence, rattling around his head. He ignores her, hoping with the foolishness of a child wishing away winter's embrace to keep his sister safe, that the teacup isn't broken after all.)

Ulysses meets him at the Trojan Horse, and Hannibal doesn't notice him until a hand squeezes his shoulder.

Hannibal inhales sharply, bloodied embraced still haunting after almost a year of healing and hiding from everyone and each other, but forces himself to relax.

"Ulysses, I'm eager to see what you have planned for us tonight."

Will's not far away. Hannibal had spotted their Rolls Royce peeling out of the garage on the security cameras outside the house, and he'd seen those familiar curls ducking behind happy strangers every few streets as Hannibal walked without hurry. He wonders, briefly, if Will had stolen his phone again, if he'd read the innuendos laden in every text, and if they'd offended the way his marriage had offended Hannibal.

Ulysses is well-groomed, wealth displayed sedately in the cut of his suit and the glint of precious metal adorning his wrist. His joy is clear, not hidden behind layers and layers of metaphor and masks, and it is refreshing and disheartening simultaneously.

He focuses on pleasure, on Will's encroaching presence that Hannibal can almost *taste*. Not yet close enough to scent, not exactly near enough to hear what they might say to one another.

"Where is she?" he murmurs into the pulse of Ulysses' throat, unaffected by the shiver he receives in response. "Your muse."

"Not far, *Doctor Lecter*," he purrs. "Her apartment is mere blocks from here."

"Where shall her art meet an audience?"

“In the museum of Ancient Troy, I’d think. Circe’s fate was a consequence of the Trojan War.”

“Appropriate,” Hannibal assents, watching the man preen like a male bird wishing to attract a mate. “Is your design painted with Waterhouse’s brush?”

“Echoes of it, a brush made to paint the burnt afterimage of it behind my eyelids.”

“Show me,” Hannibal demands.

Ulysses’ smile is all teeth, sharp and pointed, and Hannibal’s appetite remains infuriatingly absent.

“Gladly.”

For a moment, Hannibal feels something, not unlike regret, watching Ulysses breaks the pitiful lock on the garden gate and welcomes Hannibal in, as he shares a planned kill with another, and it isn’t Will – because Dolarhyde, the mausoleum to the Great Red Dragon the house on the bluff had become, was a crime of passion in every sense of the word, spontaneous and intimate and in the moment, not the type of hunt Hannibal indulged in, once – but shoves that down. Summoning a little control, he calms himself, radiating a confident amusement to Ulysses. He peeks at the street, but his and Will’s car does not come into sight.

“Hannibal?”

Shredding the faint curiosity of where Will lost them, Hannibal moves forward, allowing Ulysses the lead. It is his design, after all, it would be rude to interfere.

(But Hannibal’s mind is not wholly his own, ransacked and stripped bare by Will and the Ocean’s hostile womb, birthed into vagaries and lies coalescing in a distilled prism of psychedelic madness.

This is not his design, nor Will’s, for if it had been, Circe would not have sufficed. Her poisoned offerings, by some interpretations melded with the offered seed of Odysseus himself, would not have been enough to satisfy either of them.

In Hannibal’s mind, beside the ugly heart and stained-glass fragments, intertwined forms linger, death and violence and madness in the depths of hell, the intimacy of flesh in teeth, coppery blood filling one’s lungs and mouth, the doublethink kindness of violence, the hunger of a nude embrace.

Hannibal is uncertain who is guiding who through the inferno, both witness to the delicacies of sorrow and madness in hellfire, but it would’ve been beautiful.

(It *is* beautiful, in the foyer of his bared mind, fish hooks neatly placed in skin to maintain the pose, hearts removed with a surgical precision Will would watch the same way he’d watched in the beginning, with Silvestri’s donor and a back alley surgery successful only because of his continued practice through less ethical means. Recipes call to him, metaphor-wrapped

confessions Will wouldn't reject, a heart that Will might hold and keep and *consume* the way he'd never consumed Hannibal, and it tastes like hope and curdles in his throat.)

Ulysses lacks the refinement Hannibal's kills always had, more of a shaky, frenetic energy that reminds him of Will – not that his mind ever strays far from that topic – violent and righteous and full of bubbling madness. Hands and fists, favored over knives. Ulysses has a gun, but Hannibal doubts he'll use it – not this creature Hannibal coaxed into Becoming – not when art, true art, requires a level of touch guns can never offer.

He's not disappointed.

Hannibal positions himself at the dining room table, dressed in a plastic suit not unlike the ones he'd left behind in Baltimore, legs crossed as Ulysses lies in wait, concealed to the untrained eye: a predator's camouflage.

"Merhaba," he greets politely, when the sacrifice comes into the kitchen thoughtlessly, absentminded, until her subconscious awareness kicks in enough for her to look and *see*.

She doesn't scream, there's not quite enough time for that. Ulysses' hands are already wrapped around her throat, stroking her cheek with his thumb as he keeps her muffled. There's power, watching that spark of life fade, watching her lungs begin to give up and her heart start to acquiesce to reality, kicking and thrashing enough that Hannibal comes over.

Ulysses' eyes are fathomless, ocean blue and deep, and Hannibal wants to lose himself once more.

He takes the scalpel to her skin, humming as tears well in her eyes, as pain and horror alternate in priority, and her mind stutters because no one's ever prepared for a predator in the one place they feel safe.

(stained kitchens and dead daughters and lies as intimacy, Hannibal thinks, and the thought refuses to drown.)

It's not quite surgical. His precision is dampened by a lack of practice, by a lack of will–

(*he's cutting their hearts out while they're still beating, picturing his own sinew and bone and epicardium peeled away for myocardium reveals, and Will's eyes are glinting, dark, reflected and refracted madness his and Hannibal's, their design*–)

–but muscle memory carries him through the task admirably, reacting despite himself when Ulysses brushes his cheek, comes beside him and whispers sweet nothings he doesn't process. When hands grip his waist, drawing him in with blood marking them and unifying them–

(–*Will's moving closer, elusive and ethereal. The discarded screams are forgotten, hearts acquired and stored as Will's hands find a place on his hips, as Will twines them together like marriage trees, indistinguishable halves of a whole*–)

–Hannibal sighs, something slotting into place in a burst of spray from a nicked artery, from the beauty of uncontrolled violence he can *taste* . Ulysses leans forward, cementing him in this reality, and Hannibal's looking over his shoulder at Abigail's dying form, looking over his shoulder at that weeping neck, and she's saying *we can't breathe, Hannibal,* and *breathe,* but not calmly, every word voiced like a cry for help, a plea, and there's a heart in his hand from the body, disconnected from the whole, and it's a trembling, bleeding image between reality and delusion. A shaky thing with no anchor, no paddle, and Ulysses is moving closer, impossibly closer, licking his lips, unaware of a ceasing breath and heartbeat pains in the palm of Hannibal's hand, of the choking cruelty fading over his shoulder, unaware of the person Hannibal is picturing, the lips he's–

(-*Will tastes the way adrenaline feels, crashing into him with the force of ocean waves eroding the bluff. Gore paints the scene around them in broad strokes, to God's will, to their mutual pleasure, as Hannibal wants to–*)

–It's sharp awareness that cuts through him as Ulysses tongue slips between his teeth seeking to taste. Glass shards through his mucosa and up, cycled through blood until it's bleeding in his throat. There's a taste Judas would know, as Ulysses presses against him, and Hannibal lets him. Copper and sin and promised satisfaction undercut by something more and less than guilt and regret, something divine and hideous.

There's power here, as the scent of death breaches his practiced-calm, as they separate, and Hannibal can feel Ulysses' hardness pressed against him with intent.

(Touch has intent, and unlike Chiyoh, Ulysses has never worn gloves.)

"You're gorgeous," Ulysses says, licking the blood from Hannibal's neck and jaw. The scalpel slips, and when he looks down, the heart is still there, faintly beating. He's cut another artery, careless and messy, teeth at a throat without care for artistry.

Hannibal presses into him until their teeth clack, and it tastes like power.

(Hannibal's never been quite this type of killer.)

(-*Hannibal wants to take him apart and put him together, to rearrange the entirety of him until Hannibal can fill every hole and gape in flesh and identity, wants to fuck him with abandon, to let Will do the same, to taste their kills between a closed loop of two-mouth intimacy–*)

As Ulysses strips him of his suit, evidence discarded recklessly across another crime scene of touch and tongues and bloodshed consensual for (most) involved parties, the faint purr of an engine rolls up and dies. A familiar scent permeates the house, one well known.

(*Will*, he thinks in a burst of clarity.)

"Fuck me," he says.

Ulysses doesn't hesitate, unwilling to waste an opportunity and power Hannibal's never afforded him, before.

He presses Hannibal into the concrete with eager hands, bloodstroke brushes over his skin and scars, murmuring a painful sort of praise Hannibal ignores before slipping inside Hannibal with a flick of his tongue.

Hannibal groans, letting the rumble of it reverberate in the room as Ulysses continues, twisting this way or that, pressing through the dry tightness until it gives enough for fingers to penetrate.

"*Baptême,* you're tight," Ulysses voices, all liquid desire and wanton obscenity. He bites Hannibal hard enough for an imprint to linger on the meat of Hannibal's ass, before curling his fingers this way and that.

Ulysses brushes across a spot that makes Hannibal shiver, and he smirks. Wetting his fingers once more, he adds a second, scissoring Hannibal open without care for the stretch, the almost virgin-tight ring of muscle unused to touch after three years without, and that only makes Hannibal want this more, want this salacious, wrong thing, want Will to witness it, and finally decide, the way he's repeatedly failed to for all of their courtship called a friendship.

"I knew it would be beautiful," Ulysses is saying, awed and worshipful. Hannibal wishes he'd thought to gag him. "I knew it would feel like coming home."

It sounds too much like something Will's imago might say, when his mind was kinder and his thoughts were better structured. Before marriages and cliff falls, and all that entails. It sounds too much like what he wants more than anything.

Hannibal shuts his eyes as the fingers recede, feeling the layers of gore across his skin keenly. He waits for more, for whispers or prayers to a temple of vices, but none come. There's a gasp behind him – not of pleasure – and when Hannibal dares to look, Will's hands are on Ulysses throat, unyielding. Displeased.

Dark, abyssal eyes: the call of the void with the pull of a singularity in space past the event horizon.

"Will," he says softly, shifting to his knees from the floor, not sparing Ulysses more than a glance. "I'm–"

"Don't you fucking say a *word*," Will hisses through his teeth, and Hannibal's hoping he'll bite enough to bleed them both dry, "you manipulative son of a *bitch*."

Ulysses, evidently feeling betrayed and aware this is no longer going his way, struggles in Will's vice grip embrace. Incensed beyond reason, with the righteousness of God, Will lets him go.

The smirk on his face should be a warning, but it's one Ulysses has never learned to read.

Hannibal smiles; appetite whetted at last.

Will did his research on this wannabe usurper, not a bride nor a victim, but some halfway point of irrelevance, never realized enough to escape.

Some lawyer type, conveniently located in each place a wannabe Ripper struck. Death displayed for the voyeuristic masses, but without innovation or the true elegance Hannibal's own kills had. A knock off of a knock off, Baroque and *boring,* more than beautiful.

Knowing it, knowing how much he pales in comparison to Will's own potential, to Hannibal's own standards, doesn't make the sight of him trespassing on *Will's* monster any easier to stomach, invited by said monster or not. The bruising grip isn't satisfying, isn't quite like killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs, or thinking about killing Hannibal (not like Freddie, for the moments he'd deliberated between Jack's way and Hannibal's, not like Randall, intimate and powerful.)

He doesn't exactly have Hannibal's sense of smell, but he can taste the fear coming from a once-predator, the acid vapors Will could sustain himself on, intoxicate himself with. When the bird caught in his hands struggles, rabbit pulse all the more enticing for it, Will lets go, and he smirks.

(Ulysses Lafayette, a twisted, funhouse, Dollar Store version of Will with more money than sense and more pretention than practicality, from French-Canada rather than the French-Bayou, light honey blond curls instead of dark ones, madness coaxed to the surface by art rather than the people behind it, and delighting rather than tolerating.

To his mind, this is one of the lesser evils Hannibal has done unto him. One of the lesser pains exchanged as currency.

To his heart, this is tantamount to Blasphemy: the unforgivable sin.)

Ulysses is fast, but Will's faster.

Instincts, predatory or other, don't fade no matter how long they lay dormant. Will's attempts at self-domestication failed before the Great Red Dragon, and they fail again in this place of more than one crime. He sees a bird, bloodied and vulnerable and weak, and he wants to crush it.

It's almost too easy, taking a well-placed knife to his back, making him collapse among the ruins of whatever designs he'd had on a monster not *meant* for him. The blood of Odysseus is a potent thing, enough for him to crave it further.

His threshold for tolerance has been met, cruelty dealt, and all that's left is delight.

Will stabs the knife into guts, feels the syrupy slick sensation of serosanguinous satisfaction leaking onto his hand. He looks at the man, at the scars Hannibal left him, at the marks of an alchemical nature peeking out from his back, and it's blood, breath, and radiant *lies* again, repeated ear to ear with a seductive investment, a gentle coaxing, until it erupted into the naturality of violent decay.

It isn’t Ulysses' back he sees when he turns the man over, leaving the knife in so he can feel the full extent of everything Will wants to do to him, it’s the unfurled wings of tattooed madness, the very person they’d killed on the bluff.

He looks at Hannibal, briefly, takes in his wine-dark eyes, his pouty lips painted in flaking blood, the entirety of this person Will’s so tired of denying he delights in seeing and knowing and feeling the empathetic brush of when both of them are hungry and wanting.

The enormity of what lies in Hannibal, bared for Will’s examination, is almost frightening, so he looks away, and turns to more familiar pursuits.

(Murder and madness and his unfortunate proclivity for both.)

Will flips Ulysses back over with a faint pulse of that familiar *jealousy* when the scars overtake tattoos, when he can see all the scattered intimacies that have obviously occurred more than just the once, that have healed and reopened and are scabbing over now, pointless attempts at healing from a corpse-to-be.

Ulysses’ lip splits when he screams, Will’s fists hungry, so hungry, and the thrill of it is high enough for him to fall further and further and further, caught in this familiar orbit, left in this familiar mind that he and Hannibal share.

A part of him expects Ulysses to become Hannibal, like Randall had, when Will stripped him of predator skin and made him prey, but Hannibal’s smiling face does not greet him; no, instead it’s the unreality of swirling mirages, it’s Randall’s broken nose, it’s Tobias Budge’s bloodied skull, it’s Francis’ blood spilling onto him like an induction rite, it’s Alana’s bruised skin Hannibal marked to punish Will, and it’s Bedelia’s curdling satisfaction grating at his edges and patience. It’s the flickering faces of all the people that have stood between them, between the culmination of Hannibal’s manipulations and Will’s corrupted desires, between the inevitability set forth by their chance meeting and mutual acquaintance.

(When Hannibal touched him in the past, Will wanted to break him, but right now, he wants to rip his flesh from the limb and *feast,* to cut him open and carve marks for each bruise and kiss the false Odysseus offered, every part of Hannibal he indulged in that never should’ve been touched.

A part of him, drunk on blood-bought power and arousal and euphoria, wants to skin Hannibal’s epidermal layer, to watch it regrow and replace all the parts and cells that have been touched by another. A part of him wants to make an incision in the meat of Hannibal’s chest, right over the heart and the ribcage, wants to cut rib from Adam and plant it in himself in such a way that can’t be ignored, wants to squeeze that precious heart until he can hear and feel and taste every beat as though it is his own. A part of him wants to cut out Hannibal’s kidney and cook it for them both.

It’s beyond sanity and life and goodness, but they are creatures of the dark: the light of dying stars will never quite reach them.)

As he pulls his hands away, the rotating faces stutter to a stop, at once his would-be replacement, Ulysses, emerges in a pool of broken bones and blood, not unlike the picture

Randall Tier made in the living room of his house in Wolf Trap.

Will doesn't care to admire it though, still filled with an emotion beyond words, still broiling and churning in the tempestuous tides of his rage. There's blood coating his skin, slathered across his mouth and jaw and clothes, across his fists and arms and everywhere in between.

(*It was intimate*, but that's not exactly the best thought for his already fraying tether to self-control, to sanity, because *it was intimate* is not just about murder, and Hannibal's intimacy extended too far.)

Hannibal's still on his knees, supplicant, and Will can see the snowfall decorating an unforgiving landscape he'd once called home, can see the smug resignation in Hannibal's eyes as he corners Will: a final *check* before Will takes himself from the board.

"What was your intention, coming here? Knowing I was coming here?"

"What's anyone's intention, in matters of flesh?"

Will laughs, choking on the sound.

"More honorable than yours, as a matter of policy."

Hannibal smiles with his teeth, and Will wants to eat him whole.

Hannibal pulls something from the cavity of another corpse, and Will sees the pulsing organ burning in his monster's hands.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, pressing trembling fingers against his cheek, begging Will for something he doesn't understand. "Open, please."

(And it's the first time Hannibal's touched him since gripping his hand and forcing the knife to penetrate, since embracing him on the cliff. It's the first time Hannibal's touching him for something more than pain in what feels like years. Will's anger abates, temporarily, lost in aubergine seduction and the warm embrace of a monster's love.)

Will obeys, trembling too, and Hannibal lifts the heart to his lips and coaxes him to take a bite.

The texture is indescribable: wet and acidic with fear, the gaminess of kidney meat, the sweetness of six pomegranate seeds. Copper tang an aftertaste, the satisfaction of a fresh kill.

Abigail swirls into view, brushing aside the corpse with a kick of her boot, and looking down at the very book Will had left in his room, page corners dog-eared as he'd tried to decipher the reality of Bedelia's ostentatious bullshit.

"He woke her then, and trembling and obedient, she ate that burning heart out of his hand."

Because Abigail's not the one reading Dante at night to try and understand the one person who'd become his everything. Abigail's not the one caught in memories pondering better

outcomes, other worlds, where the right choice was made and reality aligned with his desires, for once. Abigail's not the one living, because she never was.

Will takes another bite from Hannibal's hand, eyes locked on his. He can't look away, caught in mutual orbits and gravitational fields, and he's thinking of the deaths of stars and how they set the universe ablaze, thinking of how easy it would be to collapse into Hannibal's existence, half a whole, and lose whatever hesitations have held him separate for this long.

Do you ache for him? Bedelia asks, over Hannibal's shoulder, a ghost in a room unwanted and bitterly hates.

It's not so simple as yes or no. It's not so simple as an ache.

It's prolonged throbbing, an all-over tenderness that can't find cure in separation, it's the ache of bullets and bruises, the convulsions of encephalitis delusions, the gestation of hunger, a profound yearning for more than abstract ideals in Memory Palace corridors and forsaken rivers.

He forces Hannibal to take a bite of the woman's heart, and chases the taste through the sealing of their bloodied lips.

There's nothing soft about the way Will rocks into Hannibal, hands clawing at every inch of skin in grip, teeth biting at Hannibal's mouth. Everything about it is unfamiliar, and everything about it is what he's been feeling the absence of so keenly.

He licks the blood from Hannibal's skin eagerly, desperately, nails scraping at the strength of broad shoulders and pulling him close as he can, close as he dares, making a man with four arms and four legs, and wondering why the fuck he's waited so long for this, why he'd entered a one-sided lavender marriage when he'd never be capable of loving someone other than this man he wants to tear apart.

"Will," Hannibal lets out, the word coated in sin and lustful admissions. Will bites Hannibal's shoulder until he breaks skin, kisses the blood from the wound as he coaxes bloodletting with scratched-in trails; cleansing the blood, skinning not entirely ruled out yet.

"Will," but it's not a chorus yet, it's not a hymn to Will, not a scream in a stream, and Will can't stop, suddenly, taking Hannibal with him to the slicked ground, stripping himself of clothes and wishing Hannibal would just shut the fuck up.

"Shut up," he says, watching the flush of arousal swirl in Hannibal's eyes like blood in the moonlight, washed away by the Atlantic Ocean. Hannibal, to his credit, does shut up, jaw tightening briefly as his arms flex before relinquishing himself to Will.

Will presses him into the bloodied concrete, not really giving a shit if they're contaminating the crime scene because they are, in fact, fucking dead: this is the after life, and they're sinners, and fucking at a crime scene is one of the less sinful things they've done together or apart. The pliancy is strange, but pleasing, satisfying, soothing him in a way he hadn't known he'd crave.

It makes him feel like Hannibal is his, the same way Will's always been Hannibal's.

Will skims over Hannibal's skin, teasing touches that don't allow for any true satisfaction, amused as Hannibal forces himself still, despite the painful hardness that's been there for at least as long as he's smelled Will.

"I could kill you," Will whispers into the warmth of Hannibal's throat, feeling the heartbeat under his lips with a thrum of satisfaction, feeling it match his own rapid beat. "I almost want to."

Hannibal says nothing, as Will requested, shivering when teeth drag over his carotid arteries in warning, almost like a promise, because Will's still deliberating in between different highs. Their intimacy has always been laced with violence, but this is a different beast entirely, because the power that had gone through them made him hard, and the picture of a dead competitor, the image of Hannibal coated in the blood of Will's kill, would be enough to get him off.

"You'd let me do anything to you, Hannibal, wouldn't you? Anything, but leave."

Hannibal stiffens.

"I've afforded you every opportunity."

"We both know you'd hunt me down and rip my throat out, as I would with you. Separation is not viable, never has been."

"You chose someone else," Hannibal bites out, moaning almost against his will when their dicks align and he rocks against Will's heat.

"You married Bedelia."

"A ruse, one that didn't last *three years*."

"Shut up," Will snaps, hands reaching for that neck corded with muscle and the flutter of a mirrored pulse, wrapping around it and picturing what he's pictured countless times: a fantasy as old as his awareness of Hannibal. "You fucked someone *else*, you stopped touching me."

"You tried to kill us." Hannibal's voice slips into an artic tone, forearm flexing as he rips Will's arms from his neck. "Why would I dare presume that intimacy would be welcomed, when my life wasn't?"

"You've always fucking presumed, the one time I was prepared for it, you pulled away and gave what's *mine* to ***someone else***!"

Hannibal, evidently, has nothing to say that, or it might be the remainder of the heart Will shoved between his teeth in a makeshift gag keeping him quiet.

The knife Will had discarded earlier he finds in Ulysses' worthless gut. He pulls it out, uncaring of the blood that spills out like discharge. He takes it back over to Hannibal, who's

glaring at him with a mouth full of pig heart.

“I think it’s time I remind you *exactly* who you forced from the chrysalis,” Will whispers, taking the knife to the neat stitches on Hannibal’s stomach and cutting a few open.

The spilling blood tastes like what he imagines ichor would, as he sips it and swirls it in his mouth like aerated wine.

Hannibal’s breath hitches, almost twitching beneath Will as he latches on and *sups* from the wound he’d given Hannibal. And god, it’s indescribable, feeling Hannibal and tasting him, and being so close to being in him.

The wound isn’t serious enough to warrant immediate medical attention, so he ignores it, lets the ichor continue to spill over the edges of stitches and shifts his focus to Hannibal’s slightly spread thighs. Will opens them further, still furious at the audacity of Ulysses, of *Hannibal* , enough so to not care about prep and condoms and things like not being covered in fucking blood.

“I’m going to fuck you,” Will says, “and you’re going to take it because I don’t care if it hurts. Your toy prepped you well enough, I’m sure.”

And he does, parts those legs and slides right the fuck into that tight heat, every catch of skin almost painful, almost too much.

Hannibal’s not loud, but he sighs as Will shifts in him, as he begins to fuck him in earnest, jack-hammering in and out without care for Hannibal’s own satisfaction in the face of his own. Hannibal’s hard enough that Will could probably get him to come with a single lick, the brush of a pinkie, but he’s not feeling generous.

“Don’t come,” he tells Hannibal when he can feel the man getting close, legs wrapped around his waist and rim deliciously tight around his length. He’s panting, draped over Hannibal’s body like the painting Hannibal had turned to ash in front of Will, but there’s no lamenting or loss in this portrait. “Have you let anyone else fuck you like this?”

Will plucks the heart from Hannibal’s mouth, tossing it aside to let him answer.

“Are you asking if I’ve ever been penetrated before?” Hannibal asks, lips quirked in a mocking sort of amusement. Will bites him again, and barely resists the urge to take his pound of flesh.

“I have,” Hannibal answers, gasping when Will bites him again on the other side of his neck. “Bedelia, in Paris, Antony Dimmond, in Florence. Many before that, in Baltimore and scattered across continents.”

Will is once again struck by the overwhelming desire to kill Bedelia, to kill her and every other person to know Hannibal in this way, to scrub that knowledge from a scorched Earth until he’s the sole holder of it.

“Who’s Antony?”

“Potential,” Hannibal says, pressing his lips to the silvered scar along Will’s temple, his worst attempt at severance of them all.

“The Valentine on a Broken Man,” Will murmurs, then, louder, “you let him fuck you?”

“It was a mutual desire. You betrayed me. I craved creature comforts.”

Will scoffs, slamming back into Hannibal once more trying to crack that calm veneer.

“Whores and luxuries, is that what you pictured when you asked me to leave?”

Hannibal’s eyes flash, warmth receding, and he flips their positions so he’s left on top. Will stares up at him, lips parted, groaning when Hannibal sinks back down onto his dick and takes control.

“I pictured a family,” he hisses, riding Will at a punishing pace, pinning Will’s arms above his head as they seep and sink into each other together, skin coated in a thin sheen of sweat, blood between them merging and melding into an indistinguishable whole. “I pictured *agape*, and other foolish Earthly desires.”

“You never said,” Will murmurs.

“You never asked.”

“I didn’t know the question.”

“No,” Hannibal corrects, half a snarl. His nose trails the available expanse of Will’s skin, cataloging it for his Memory Palace, probably. “You knew. You knew enough to know what rejection would do, what absence would do. You just resented the knowledge.”

“I resented the implication,” and there’s a simmering heat in his gut, a subtle clenching that’s a warning as he bites his bottom lip and shuts his eyes.

“Don’t you always?”

Hannibal’s rubbing his cheek, and Will’s half waiting for the knife, as they both gasp.

“You changed me, tainted what was there.”

“You consider me a reagent?”

Philosophy to chemistry, always talking even during sex, Jesus Christ he’s going to make Hannibal choke on his dick just to shut him up.

“You’re certainly not a *fucking* catalyst, Hannibal, they remain unchanged by the reaction they coerce out of potential. You’ve changed, as I have.”

Hannibal slams himself down once more, letting Will bottom out inside him and letting out a string of curses in a language Will doesn't know before slamming their lips together, teeth clacking, tongue slipping into the bloody heat of his monster's mouth and cutting himself on

their sharper desires. Will lifts his hips, filling the crime scene with the ricocheting sounds of skin slapping skin, flesh begetting flesh, copper-tainted depravity in a place of manufactured death.

They're clawing at each other, biting and scratching and fucking and moving together, and he can feels his darker impulses to cut and sew and stitch them together mirrored in Hannibal, can taste it, scent it in the air like a fucking bloodhound.

He can't tell who's doing what, their limbs and skin and individuality blurring as it had once before, satisfaction equal and opposite, pain given and taken in a cycle not unlike *ourboros* , fucking and being fucked and bleeding and being bled and a spiral of memories that are as bitter as they are sweet.

"Will," Hannibal's saying, and he's falling apart in a sparking haze of building satisfaction, feeling himself and feeling Hannibal, together, always together, and he thinks they should be together.

Hannibal's mouth is bloody, as they hover over each other chasing climax, and the blood in his mouth isn't Will's, and Will thinks it should be.

"Bite me," Will says desperately, hips snapping up, nails embedded in the brand on Hannibal's back. "Bleed me, break me, *fuck*."

Hannibal's teeth sink into the epidermal layer of skin, sharper by far than Will's own. Had he not felt the pulse of Hannibal's humanity in front of the bluff and under his tongue, he might've thought Hannibal was a vampire.

I love you, Will's thinking, and it's the first time he's thought it, voiced it, articulated it in such an obvious way, a way that cannot be misconstrued, cannot be misunderstood, cannot be taken back or revoked. It strikes him like a parting blow, a final violence of a love named as such.

The point of no return, on the edge of orgasm: they both spill over.

Will runs afterwards, because that is the pattern set in stone, the eternity of cyclical time and fate's razor sharp noose, and maybe he wants it to hurt, craves it even, but not in a permanent way. Not in the way of teacup-destruction and shattering porcelain.

(Will intends a hairline fracture, something salvageable, something minimal, something that can be controlled and forgotten, but with them, it's always a break of bone, a splintering rib, plucked from his chest and shoved in the ground (nothing comes from it, of course: his companion is made, his temptation towards other pursuits, the one who takes apples of knowledge and leaves unmarred, looks God in the eye and cares little for his plans or will.) It's always the inevitability of destruction, the resurrected hopelessness of time and teacups and decay, of entropy and loss.

Will doesn't mean to run, but that's what's in his bones to do.)

Will fucks him apart and leaves him in a crumbled heap in a crime scene of consummation, a place of things with wings drowned in blood and abandonment. Ulysses' broken form is far more brutalized than Randall's had ever been, but Hannibal had known this was a possibility.

That this could be an outcome of his decisions.

(He hadn't anticipated…hadn't quite *predicted*…)

Hannibal shakes his head, cold once more in contrast with the roaring flame of Will's heat, his embrace – even his hate, close enough to taste, painful and delicious. His abdomen is still spilling onto the wooden floors, leaking slowly, and his back leaves rivers that remind Hannibal of rainfall.

Staring at the chipping paint on the ceiling feels inevitable, lying in a pool of mutual release and spilled blood, feeling the chill of abandonment seep into his bones and seize his heart once more. He's felt this before. Half-dead in a fall of snow, among the crunch of leaves and the cruel silence a goodbye imparts.

(Hannibal had felt it in the all-consuming way he can only liken to religion.)

Hannibal rubs a hand along his face, letting the flakes of blood fall from his skin along with salt-water he isn't entirely willing to admit to: spill over of that abominable misty-haze, the first sign of loss.

He laughs, a low, mad rumble he can't control. He chokes on it, lifting himself to his knees with shaky arms and blurry vision, still laughing, laughing enough to hurt, enough to ransack his Memory Palace, enough that he wonders if he should call Jack directly, or wait for Will to just end it all.

He's still laughing when Bedelia's pointed heels enter his faulty perception, slipping between the seams of reality and Will's place of victory, here and not.

Tears spill down his face without pause, like streams of blood, and he blames Will for both.

"Was it satisfactory?" her voice is clipped, cold, not quite on par with the subdued jealousy he's sure the real Bedelia Du Maurier's inflections would carry.

Hannibal's mad laughter dies to a chuckle, bitter, as he wipes his face and feels the rainfall of freedom and the snowy isolation of goodbye. He's cold and naked, shivering and wrecked, and finally understands the plight of Tantalus:

Every worldly desire in grasp, only to slip from touch the moment he became close enough to hope.

(Tantalus had been a cannibal too, delighting in horror and filicide for shock value. Even if Hannibal never quite delighted in filicide, and his divine blasphemy came in different forms.)

“By what definition?”

She regards him with a pointed neutrality almost like a glare, chin raised in challenge.

“By yours.”

“I found satisfaction in the event, yes.”

“Yet you find yourself dissatisfied with the aftermath?”

Hannibal looks around him, the mismatched realities, like patchwork stained glass from two separate eras: past and present, life and afterlife. This is not his design, not his heart’s desire, not an outcome he’d anticipated or predicted.

“He took it,” Bedelia continues calmly, the click of her heels echoing the cathedral ceilings as she circles the bodies. “Trembling and obedient, as Dante spoke of. You have found nourishment at the very sight of him, and yet he does not see through your bars of plight.”

“Has he ever?”

Her lips quirk, the clinical amusement of a biologist overseeing a particularly satisfying dissection.

“When it conveniences him. When he needs to, to achieve his ends.”

“My imprisonment.”

“Your life,” she offers casually, leaning against the cheap wood of the unknown woman’s dresser. “Your submission.”

Hannibal breaks her icy gaze, staring at the scattered ruins of that which he thought he’d let go of.

“Eating him was not tolerable.”

“Nor was separation. You found that equally unpalatable.”

“I could kill him.”

“You won’t,” a third voice says clinically, positioned over Ulysses with soft eyes. “It might have been possible, in the churning gestation of the Atlantic. An abortion, your rebirth with a missing limb, but he’s not *separable* anymore.”

“You won’t leave either,” Bedelia Du Maurier continues. “You’d always wonder, and that wonder would see you killed in less pleasant ways.”

“There’s no pleasure to be found here,” Hannibal murmurs, staring at his hands and all this pointless blood. “In the struggle of Tantalus.”

“I told you Hannibal,” Chiyoh says, leaning over him to brush his cheek through the thick leather of her gloves. “I warned you. He will be your death, this is how your Fates have strung the future.”

“And how have you divined this knowledge? Necromancy?”

“You are already dead, Hannibal,” Chiyoh states as she kneels beside him.

“The omens are quite clear,” Bedelia intones as they stare at him.

“Augury,” Hannibal murmurs.

Bedelia slides to him, kneeling beside him opposite Chiyoh.

“Fate is set,” Bedelia says in his ear.

“The lots are cast,” Chiyoh continues.

“I feel for him, of him,” Hannibal whispers, tasting salt as he kneels.

“Tantalus loved what he couldn’t touch. He never tried to find satisfaction in drowning, or in hanging from the tree,” Chiyoh says with another stroke of her thumb.

“Achilles died of love, from love, and his love was returned,” says Bedelia.

Hannibal’s lips twist, and he bows his head.

“He cannot love you, it is not in his nature. Not the way you want, the way you need,” is Chiyoh’s input.

“A love half-returned,” he says to himself, to the empty apartment.

“But love always leaves,” Bedelia is the one to answer, gesturing over Hannibal’s shoulder, “doesn’t it?”

Hannibal squeezes his eyes shut as soft footsteps approach, a familiar tread, even after all these years: the flashbulb recall only trauma can offer.

“Anniba,” she says, in the softfondwarmloving way only she’s ever said it, butchered as it is. Chiyoh’s hand is replaced by hers, cold as snow, and he can’t look.

He’d looked once, scraps and spare parts in a shed made into a food pantry. He’d never looked again once her wing was built, her doors guarded, her safety and his sanity maintained and regulated.

(Her taste never leaves, pervading even the most lustrous of foods: it’s the most horrible thing he’s ever had, a macabre satisfaction he wishes he could cut out.)

“Not real,” he reminds himself firmly, grounding himself in the ache in his limbs, the sting of wounds, the throb of his lips, the pulsing pain of his heart. “Not real.”

“Reality is subjective,” he hears from Bedelia, as small hands rub his cheek, as he recalls the hot slip of broth down his throat, the unsuspecting chunks he’d never savored properly, too hungry, too desperate, too *naively* grateful. “Human perception is influenced by circumstances outside our control, our construction of various sensations and sensory input.”

“We are real to you,” Chiyoh echoes.

Mischa presses a gentle kiss to the ridge of his cheekbone, just over a few stray streams.

“Sorry, Anniba,” she says, and he still won’t look, seeing without looking her mangled corpse and her meat in the bottom of a bowl of broth and her footsteps leading up to a door he wishes he’d never opened.

“Love didn’t save her.”

“Love won’t save you.”

He cups Mischa’s soft hand on his face, wishing beyond anything it was real, that the teacup came back together, that he could have even one thing he loved in this world.

“He has to kill you,” they both say, squeezing his shoulder and standing between him and the corpses he’s left from love, for love, to love. A slaughterhouse floor, a killing room that never ends, a burning heart that never stops bleeding. Mischa’s half in his arms in a broken memory, and the only reality to be found is his blood and his pain and death. “You have to let him.”

“He has to kill me,” Hannibal repeats numbly, feeling Mischa’s weight evaporate from his arms, feeling Chiyoh and Bedelia’s eyes fall away from him. He gets to his feet, almost stumbles, and steadies himself on the dresser. “He has to kill me.”

It is, in truth, the only palatable solution. The only way to ensure Will’s chrysalis is fully shed, the only way to never be separate from him, to cling to the trees of Will’s forest as a shadowed specter, to taint Will’s hands like blood spatter. Death can unify them, in a permanent way that is not possible otherwise.

Will can’t leave him behind, if Will kills him.

This uncertainty, this instability, can be over. Will’s self-actualization in the form of Hannibal’s sacrifice, his death, his suicide as a love note: toppling the king to take the kingdom, divined in omens Hannibal hadn’t consciously read, prophesied in books he’d never read. Oedipus and Laius.

Every decision he’s made, every outcome he’s sought, only solidified this reality, this branch of a sprawling universe.

Will has to kill him, and Hannibal has to make that the easiest thing in the world for him to do.

Hannibal sighs, and dresses quickly in borrowed clothes, oversized sweats and a hoodie. He takes his burner phone from the ruin of his dress pants, and types three simple words:

I need you.

(Somewhere, out in the world, Chiyoh knows without asking what exactly those three words mean, and she pictures the death of Will Graham and regrets every stitch exactly the way Hannibal had suspected.)

The first thing Will does when he's home is shower, watch the flakes of blood swirl pink down the drain, and pretend everything can be washed away so easily. The scars, the pain, the memories, the words he can't forget, can't leave in the rush of the stream.

But thoughts aren't like blood, they don't drain away in a wash of water.

Neither do his scars, nor the bite he'd told Hannibal to give him.

Hannibal…

Will rests his forehead against the cool tiled wall, willing clarity to slip in along with the cold, and thinking about the way he'd left him. It hadn't been intentional, the muddled bursts of anxiety spiraling like an earthquake's aftershocks, the way he'd left Hannibal alone in a mess of their making, with two dead bodies and a hell of a lot of blood.

But god, he doesn't know how to feel about any of this because Hannibal's lips against his, Hannibal's surrender, had felt like the best damn thing in the world. His vulnerability, his devotion, his love…

Will hadn't mirrored it so much as echoed it, kin calling to kin, the impinging blow of a love returned.

Because fucking *hell* he loves Hannibal, sick of denying it, done with voluntary starvation and passive-aggressive barbs. Because Hannibal loves him too, in ways Will doesn't fully understand, and he's been starving for years.

(And god, he's thinking of every stolen moment in that old life that had never fit, the way he'd get off in the shower to avoid sex with Molly, jerking off to abstract lines of corded muscle and sharp teeth, pretending it was even slightly feminine in form. The way he'd hide away in the attic, re-reading the first three letters and wondering if he would open the next twenty, dated up to his wedding. The way he'd touch his scars and cry when the house was empty, thinking of what could've been. The way Molly was never real and Walter was never real and the whole life had been for someone who never existed: abstract ideals interchangeable with puppets, people irrelevant in the grand scheme of things.

Because he's longed for Hannibal long before cliff-dives and dragon-killing, before kneeling offerings in snow, before kitchen-heartbreak.

Maybe forever, maybe since birth, maybe loving Hannibal Lecter was strung in the meat of his brain, encoded in the subunits of his DNA, woven into the line of life the Fates gave him. It feels like it.)

"I love Hannibal," he tests, feeling the words out in the quiet of the shower. They feel right. More right than any other explanation has ever been on why he stays and keeps staying.

The words are right, but he's not quite ready to say them yet.

Hannibal's always understood him without words anyways, no reason to think this would be any different.

When Hannibal arrives home, Will has a glass of wine ready for him, aerated the way he likes, and the fireplace has grown to a comfortable warmth.

"How'd clean up go?" Will asks, letting the little flare of warmth he feels show in his smile. "Sorry I had to leave, it was just…"

"It's quite alright, Will," Hannibal says, stilted politeness oddly set in his tone. "We won't have to leave this place quite yet. I adequately cleaned the apartment and disposed of the bodies myself."

"Good," Will replies, passing him the glass.

Hannibal downs it in one gulp, setting the glass on the kitchen counter and striding past Will to the staircase.

Will frowns, following.

"Where are you going?"

Hannibal's shutting him out again, the vague outlines of feelings present, but indiscernible, razor-thin wafts of paper on an ocean of eternity Will doesn't have the words to articulate.

"To sleep," Hannibal answers, shortly. "I find myself worn out."

"Are you okay?"

Hannibal's hand tightens on the banister, his smile more than forced.

"Aren't I always?"

(And Will's thinking of the blood and bruises he'd seen back when he'd carried Will miles to his boat on the sea just to make Will feel safe. He's thinking of how Hannibal let Jack Crawford beat him half to death with hardly a struggle, just to feel something.

Hannibal is not always okay. His veil is always near impregnable, and all the fears and uncertainties that haunt Hannibal linger there. What few regrets exist, entropy-reversed desires, all remain out of sight.

But Will's seen it, in notebooks and art examined by fire in the void of night out of Molly's sight, in the lines of Hannibal's face and warmth of his eyes. Will knows better.)

"No," Will whispers, but Hannibal's already retreated out of reach.

Hannibal's behavior remains strange, for the next few days, near aggressive, always probing, staring at Will and waiting for something Will doesn't know how to offer. It's not a request for intimacy, not copper-coated desires or gravity's influence, not feigned indifference, not outright resentment. It's something different.

Hannibal's trying to persuade him to action, but to what ends Will doesn't see yet. He's not terribly worried, still adjusting to the sunburst stab of warmth every time he sees Hannibal, the way every brush of skin sends a thrill up his spine, the way he's always desperate for that pale door to open when he wakes against it with an open heart.

Will still hasn't confessed, drunk on the words and the honesty in them, indulgent in introspection, for once. It feels good, knowing. Ignorance had hurt, confused them both, and untangling the last bundled bit of his emotions is a relief.

It's affirming, and solidifies what he'd already known: there is no Will Graham without Hannibal Lecter.

It slips out one day, in the falling aftermath of a retreat when Abigail came up and they both felt shaken. They're by the fireplace, Hannibal's more quiet than normal as he sketches, and Will's love is running through him in a way he can't explain, a flood of it like a warm embrace, and he *wants* in a way he's always wanted.

"I love you," he says plainly, smiling at Hannibal and wanting to kiss him, remembering the taste of him, the feel of him, and craving the words returned. When Hannibal says nothing, eyes blank and jaw unmoving, Will repeats it.

Hannibal blinks, waiting for Will's teeth to show. They don't, twisted in an earnest mockery of an expression. Honest and sweet and gentle.

(The same sort of smile he might've given his wife, while Hannibal waited for Will to choose him.)

It's a cutting sweetness, the scent of chloroform and the internal lacerations of rose thorns and porcelain shards. It is not what is expected, not what should be.

(This is not entropy, this is not ouroboros. This is pyrite pretending to be gold, crafted from some baser metal as though the infinity of decay and rebirth has halted, as though they are people who can love, and be loved, without more violence as an answer.)

(Hannibal, for once, has accepted Will's decision: his absence, in the afterglow. It is what he should have expected, that Will's mind has oscillated this way, brushed against Hannibal's love and attempted to mirror it when there are no roots in Will's lungs to live on. This is a love that would never last, false and flighty like the breeze or a thing with wings Dickinson called hope.)

"A simple explanation for easily misconstrued bonds: transference."

Will frowns, twisting his lip in such a way that makes Hannibal want to taste it, to press skin to skin and let it burn him to a crisp, for such a pain is beautiful when it is at Will's behest, but he knows he can't. Knows it would only make this harder, make guiding his vicious, precious, lovely thing to his true darkness more difficult.

(It would only hurt more, to think himself in love and find himself the murderer of that love. Hannibal's fate had sealed in ocean water, a late-stage sepsis he'd never had a chance of halting.)

"You're not my psychiatrist," Will says, stepping closer. Hannibal, almost in sync but half a beat off, steps back, all too aware of the harpsichord at his back he's nearly pressed into.

"Yes, and no," Hannibal says. "I function in a supportive role, to an extent, and facilitate the conversations a psychiatrist might, were you their patient. The love you feel is for that which I embody – self-actualization, and peace with your inner darkness. You love the gifts I offer, the care they symbolize. You aren't in love, Will. You're reflecting the worst of someone else."

"I know what love feels like, Dr. Lecter."

Too close, so Hannibal slips away, arms behind him, grasping for shields and forts and anything to keep distance.

"Did you love your wife?"

"Biblically," Will retorts with a smirk, still advancing, "but not as an ideal, Plato's or another. I pictured you sometimes."

“Countertransference,” Hannibal explains away, feeling cornered. “Your empathy mirrors what you believe you feel in me.”

“I *love* you, Hannibal, and I know you love me too.” Will presses Hannibal into the solid door frame, mouth hovering over his as it had in the victim’s apartment. Hannibal knows how Will tastes, now.

It makes everything harder.

“No,” Hannibal says, “you don’t. It’s a misfire, I don’t begrudge you it.”

“I fucked you.”

“Aggression and sex are wires often crossed, especially by newer killers more susceptible to norepinephrine’s influence.”

“You can’t hide from me,” Will says, pressing into him, determined and victorious and so terribly beautiful. “I know all the halls of your mind.”

Will kisses him, and Hannibal shatters.

(The glass shards decorating his floor vaporize, the wooden pews burn, the organ plays a death tune, and he is left in ruins.)

It takes everything in him to pull away, because nothing’s worked thus far. Will hasn’t killed him, hasn’t so much as *yelled* at him, and Hannibal’s tired of denying himself, when everything he’s wanted is right in front of him, taunting him.

The branch or the water, Hannibal reminds himself. *I’ve picked my end.*

“You don’t love me, Will. Love is not what we have.”

“Hannibal–”

“Goodbye, Will.”

(And he leaves for Chiyoh’s Çanakkale apartment downtown. Takes the car to her, books a flight for America, and pretends it isn’t akin to ripping the beating heart from his chest.

Separation hurts more than bullets or cliff falls ever could, but it’s necessary. It is required, for Will to not regress or misplace emotions. Usurp the perceived king, rule the land how he sees fit with all the vicious righteousness and mercy Hannibal fell in love with him because of.

He leaves, and wishes that the teacup could, for even a moment, come together enough for Will to love him too.)

INTERLUDE I: CASSANDRA UNHEEDED

Çanakkale's winter fades into a mild spring season of scattered flower blooms, as CHIYOH steps off the plane a mere twenty-four hours after Hannibal's simple text. Her steel-toe boots crunch over the discarded pine cones and needles, glancing at the rise of the Martyrs Monument and the sprawling curve of the Çanakkale bridge across the Dardanelles Strait. This is a place she'd expected Hannibal to choose, a mesh of Old World and modernity, with history and Greek footprints, as well as art and entertainment.

She rubs her bleary eyes, sighing and taking a steadying breath. She'd caught a red-eye across continents after spending a day straightening her life away in Paris, a seven-hour flight with food Hannibal would certainly find horrifying.

Chiyoh smiles briefly, picturing the wrinkling indignation setting in her kyōdai's features, before the reality of her presence here returns.

Will Graham… she'd had her hopes, years ago, that he'd save Hannibal from himself, coax the love forth, bring him a fulfillment Chiyoh could never offer him after Mischa's death. Not tame him, not subdue or entrap or *cage* him. She'd been furious, standing beside Hannibal in the thick woods of Will Graham's backyard, cursing him with every word she'd never dared utter and wishing her shot had struck three inches to the left.

Hannibal hadn't let her change his mind, set in his path with the resignation of a funeral march. Hannibal hadn't let her kill him, asking her politely in low tones that frightened her more than any subtextually promised violence ever could. Cowed and cornered, she watched him surrender through the scope of her rifle, wishing beyond reason, for Will to change his mind and free Hannibal from this cruel condemnation.

Will doesn't, never would have, and she watches from a distance as he builds a lie with an apple-cheeked mousy blond and the child born of another man's seed. She watches, and still Hannibal refuses her wishes, doesn't acquiesce or relinquish Will's undeserved claim over him.

It took three years for a killer worthy of Will's attention to pop up, three years for her kyōdai to see sunlight once more.

Chiyoh's sources were too slow, Hannibal's escape hidden by federal jurisdiction and the FBI's attempts at self-protection, and she'd watched him fall from the cliff in horror, unable to stop the fall. He'd landed first, positioning Will on top of him so he'd receive the blunt force impact alone. Hannibal had broken five ribs, suffered internal bleeding, near fatal sepsis paired with hypothermia, and a delusional fever she'd had to keep him sedated through. Will's wounds had been minor, in contrast, broken bones and (in comparison) superficial stab wounds. Had it not been for Hannibal's condition, Hannibal's past pleas, Hannibal's indescribable love for this man that has brought him nothing but misery, she would've broken

Will with her hands, left him to choke on his own blood and die in the riptides of the Atlantic ocean.

Instead she'd healed him, protected Hannibal from him as long as he'd allowed, and now he's done something else she'll be left to repair.

Hannibal's teacups have a habit of breaking, and she's often left to gather the shards and line them in glue and gold: never quite enough, never quite right, always shining with past agony and irreversible scars.

Chiyoh closes her eyes, and allows herself one more moment to compose herself.

She'll hail a taxi, just as soon as she can reign in the impulse to crush Will Graham beneath her boot at rifle-point.

Hannibal is as close to overwrought as she's ever seen, suit ties just slightly *off*, eyes far-away and metaphors decidedly lackluster. When she touches him, he flinches, and when she presses her forehead against his the way she had when he'd been much younger, he slumps into her warmth.

Chiyoh cradles him, gloved fingers running through the gelled strands of his gold and gray hair, waiting for him to talk.

"*Nakama* was, perhaps, the wrong word after all," Hannibal says after a beat, fingers clenched in the thick fabric of her trench coat. "*Ikigai* is more accurate, I feel."

She looks at him, at the sad smile he wears, like a bridal veil or some kind of mask. She sees through it, but she always has.

"You love him."

"And he doesn't love me, not truly."

"*Kataomoi*," she murmurs. "I could still end him. You could join me in Paris."

He chuckles, and wraps his arms around her in a tight squeeze.

"That's my girl," he praises, faltering for a moment before continuing, "but the time for such solutions has passed."

"What will you do?"

"Stay," he says. "For the moment. I need you to do something for me, Chiyoh, before we leave. This will be one of the final things I ask of you."

“What does that mean?” she asks, dread sinking into her heavy heart.

When he smiles, she knows. She’s always known Will Graham would ruin him from the moment the handcuffs clinked into place and she lowered her gun. Warnings unheeded: love leaves us all fools.

It takes her a few days to find the desired info, track down willing informants, pay them enough to never hear from them again.

Hannibal does not visit in the interim, going between the museum of Ancient Troy, the Trojan Horse, and his home with Will. When she follows, he’s always lost in thought, staring at a blank page on his drawing pad, pencil resting against the paper without moving.

No art is created, and no pencils sharpened.

It worries her, but everything about this does.

Hannibal will only follow his plans, and dissuading him won’t result in anything other than anger. She won’t risk him going it alone and being caged once more, not like this.

He comes to her that night, after she texts him to let him know everything is ready. Airplane secured, papers falsified, trails gone cold.

There are tears in his eyes she doesn’t ask after, instead focusing on the sketch of paper crumpled in his hands:

The Death of Achilles.

Chiyoh bites her lip, and swallows down the plea she feels building. Hannibal won’t listen to her, blinded and deafened by love and humanity, unprepared for the severity of it, no tolerance built up or resistance prepared. Will had said something once more, in their home rather than Will’s alone, and it has sent Hannibal down the path of appeasements to an uncaring God once more.

Fate and circumstance have returned her to this moment.

When the teacup shatters.

(Even *kintsugi* has its limitations: dust cannot become whole, and fragments cannot be seamlessly joined, no matter how many times she attempts to make it so.)

INTERLUDE II: PHOENIX'S LAMENT

ALANA BLOOM smiles, peering in at her wife and child through the crack of Morgan's bedroom door. Margot's stripped down to an oversized band T-shirt Alana's had since university and the silk boxers she's favored for as long as Alana's known her. Her hair's still in an elegant swirl atop her head, leaning into their son's, as they both snore.

With a small laugh, she peels her high heels off, creeping into the room to press a kiss to Morgan's forehead and release her wife's hair from its confines, or else she'll get a headache and grumble about it all weekend.

Alana feels warm, standing over them, cupping the heat of her wife's lovely pink cheek. She'd been stuck at Quantico for hours, Jack near frantic in trying to determine if any number of random killings scattered across the world were Murder-Husband-esque, as Freddie Lounds would put it.

She frowns at that, stepping away slightly, as though her thoughts might taint them the way they've tainted her. Defenestrations are darker impulses. She wonders if those impulses had guided Will off the cliff, in the end, or if it had been his better half.

None of the kills *had* looked like Will's or Hannibal's, individually or the one tableau they'd made together, before their escape or death. She'd tried to find them in gore and visceral lines, dismemberment and crude surgeries, but Hannibal was not to be found.

He wouldn't be, until he wanted to be.

(Alana, selfishly, hopes he's never found, that Will's enough to curb his promises and his impulses. She's not looking for him, hoping in this instance, with everything to lose and nothing to gain, her blindness will suffice.)

Hannibal had only been caught the first time because of Dr. Du Maurier's reticence. That and the peacocking across the European continent for Will Graham's attention.

Well, she thinks to herself, slipping out of Morgan's room towards the room she shares with Margot. *He has it now.*

She'd not been blind, watching back the cliffside tapes, the gunshot and Hannibal crumpling on the floor, Will reaching for his gun and being stabbed, Hannibal launching himself at Dolarhyde to draw attention, both circling their prey together on the balcony overlooking the sea, swaying on the edge of the cliff with something like ecstasy dashed in the shared madness of their eyes.

Will had wanted to be kissed. In the moment before they fell off, the camera caught the open waves of affection murder unleashed in Will, as he guided Hannibal's hands to his body, as

he watched Hannibal hover over his panting lips and watched Hannibal waiting for a choice with something like delight.

(It'd been similar to how Will had looked before kissing her. Of course, the madness in that moment, feverish and jittery caught in limbs and folds of the mind, had been encephalitis: this one is man-made and sober. The reality of who Will Graham has always been.)

Her lips twist in distaste, as she thinks of the display.

Mason's death had been satisfying because of Margot, because of Margot's pain and trauma and the very threats she'd heard him make when Margot kissed her in the stables for the first time. It wasn't the fact that it was a death so much as the fact that it was an end: commas and semicolons traded for one period. The closing of a chapter. The shutting of a door to a house of horrors.

Francis Dolarhyde's brutalization was hideous, every bit as unsettling as every kill Hannibal had presented like artwork over the years, as Randall Tier's gore caked across museum bones, as Garrett Jacob Hobbs' blood-decorated kitchen and the brutality of nine bullets to the chest. It would haunt her, if she let herself think about it.

(Mason Verger's death, in contrast, had been quiet: fading away into waves of water with small ripples the only sign of struggle. Nothing cruel, nothing hideous, nothing wrong.

At least, that's what she tells herself.)

It's been over a year since Dolarhyde's death and Hannibal and Will's swan dive. They've only just felt safe enough to return from the comforts of London.

(*Be blind, Alana,* Hannibal had said to her, still sweet while decorated in Jack's blood, still warm with a killing blade in his hands. *Don't be brave.*

She's blind now, in the dark of her halls, in this fortress she's built on murder and insemination and love. Hannibal did spin her gold, and she's still afraid he lived, that he'll come for them, as Rumpelstiltskin once did, while she stumbles about unaware of the threat until it's too late.)

Margot won't talk about it, lips thinning whenever she brings up the possibility of their survival, of Hannibal and Will. It worries her, Alana thinks, maybe even scares her.

Margot has always hated things that scare her, that leave her feeling out of control.

Alana strips herself of her suit jacket thoughtlessly, draping it over a bedpost as she throws herself on the bed.

Hannibal hasn't come for her yet, hasn't been seen, no whispers have spread or lingered, and no body has been found. It's worse than knives and threats, worse than the shedding skin when he'd revealed himself in his kitchen to her at long last.

She shivers, and hears a floorboard creek.

“Margot?” she calls out. The only reply is a faint snore she can hear from across the hall.

Alana slips off the mattress and silk sheets silently, reaching under the bed for the small safe she keeps her gun in, not allowing herself the panic her mind wants to feel. It’s useless, trembling limbs and fears of death.

The Devil has no mercy.

She flicks the safety off, leveling a glare at the door and listening for the sound of Hannibal Lecter in her home, as she has every day since he escaped.

Silence greets her, the sound of a clearing when chirping ceases: encroaching danger she’s blinded towards.

Her heart begins to pound despite her best attempts at calming it, the fear’s acrid leeching more powerful than any attempts at restructuring and strengthening herself.

She opens the door, and is greeted by the dark.

Be blind, Alana, Hannibal warned.

She chooses to be brave.

.

.

.

It’s her last mistake.

They find Alana Bloom in the abandoned cage of Hannibal the Cannibal. It’s an image Will’s been anticipating since three days passed, without word or sight of his monster.

Since Hannibal had said goodbye like a parting stab, and left them both bleeding.

It doesn’t take much to force the pendulum’s swing, to coax his brain to shift streams, to *feel* how Hannibal had, fulfilling a promise.

I take you from your house, where you feel most safe. I’ve watched you for a few days, no, someone has watched and I have learned. I know your routines, and I know when to slip in and hide. I drug your wife and child first, so they won’t be awake to hear you scream, but I don’t kill you immediately.

Will steps closer to the familiar enclosure, resting his palm against the boundaries of it like he had when dropping the mic.

I taunt you, with a blindfold over your eyes. You won't know where we are until it's too late. You wouldn't blind yourself, so I've done it for you. But that's not all, Will senses, furrowing his brow. *You looked, and you weren't supposed to.*

Still not quite right. He flips to the next photo, noticing her eyes have been stabbed repeatedly, an unnecessary brutality not particularly relevant to the rest of this design.

Oh.

Of course.

Morality, and sight, and the narrow lens through which Alana views the world. The very lens that had coerced Will into rejecting Hannibal and himself, time and time again.

Punishment by proxy.

He spreads the rest of the photos out before him, in real life, across the dining room table he hasn't used since Hannibal left.

I kill you sweetly, poison in wine. I don't need it to hurt. Your fear will torment you more than any physical pain. Your use to me is in your elevation, what I make of you that you failed to use.

Freddie Lounds managed to snag a video of the cage on fire, Alana's corpse floating in a water enclosure built from fireproof plexiglass while the remainder of Hannibal's prison belongings burned to ash.

Alana's dressed in golden fabrics that shine like the sun, shifting fire as the video shows the fabrics settling. Her lips are parted, and silver glints from within her mouth. Obolus offerings to the Underworld: her passage into the inferno.

Greek in origin.

You signify rebirth, the canvas I dictate my message on. I offer Charon passage, not out of mercy or respect for ancient rites, but as a clue. A hint.

(*Achilles wished all Greeks would die,* Hannibal had said, something potent in his eyes, *so he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone.*)

Will snaps back to reality, ignoring Cephy and Kaiyo's curious wet noses, and rushes to the study. He tears through bookshelves until he finds what he's looking for – the English copy of Homer's *Iliad.*

The name isn't highlighted, but it doesn't need to be. Hannibal's imprints are all over this book, dashed over certain quotes by the well-worn wrinkles pressed in.

But now, Achilles, beat down your mounting fury!

It's wrong to have such an iron, ruthless heart.

Even the gods themselves can bend and change,

and theirs is the greater power, honor, strength.

Phoenix, an ambassador meant to calm Achilles enough into doing the right thing, a lone voice of morality, sanity, in the heat of war. Fitting.

Will looks back at Alana's tableau, the photos he hadn't had the chance to examine yet.

The bloody scales of justice, positioned in her old office with organs and a familiar origami heart.

I cut your brain from your skull, stitching you back together for your display. It's balanced against my heart, and lacking, as my own mind falters in the reality of my heart's whims. I resent this, weighing my options, but there is no delight in this habit. This is a message, and it's one that needs to be sent.

Will gasps, but it's like Hannibal's whispering in his ear, watching him drown in a box of purifying water before the unbalanced scales of justice in a world of fire, like he's a floating corpse that should've stayed blind.

I know looking hurts, so I hope you look. This is obvious. They will know. You will be unable to act, until I let you. You won't find me until I want to be found. This is a resurrection of myself and you. This is a reminder.

This is not an apology, Will. I am not apologizing for this.

Will casts aside the Iliad, roughly running his hands through his messy curls.

The Chesapeake Ripper's started a sounder.

He won't come back until it's done.

Hannibal doesn't reply to his texts, when Will is drunk enough to send them. Doesn't answer his calls, eventually shutting the burner off entirely to avoid him.

It makes Will angry enough to take a knife to the silk upholstery and the (hideous, vulgar, just *ugh*) *Leda and the Swan* painting in their dining room. He doesn't regret it until an unknown number pops up on his phone with a single message:

Stop.

-C

He does, for the day. Focuses on the dogs, takes them for runs and cooks their food, subsists on the leftovers Hannibal made before leaving and takeout from random street vendors in Çanakkale when he’s brave enough to leave their home.

(He stays, doesn’t chase, because Hannibal gave him three years of staying so Will could finally pick him, and after everything they’ve fucking put each other through, Will can stay long enough for Hannibal to choose him.

Damn the consequences of it, damn the guilt and the bodies and the fucking murders. Will wants Hannibal more than he cares about being a good man.)

He doesn’t ask Chiyoh how Hannibal is, despite wanting to. Doesn’t ask what he’s planning, or when he’ll be home.

Because he knows, knows with a zeal he can’t quite explain, that this is another teacup Hannibal’s dropping, an attempt to hurt him to give him yet another choice.

Yet another option.

And Hannibal, as ever, wants to be picked, but thinks he won’t be.

(Will can wait. Hannibal waited for three years on hope alone, with no promise of returns or confrontations. Will's love had a slower burn to it, a gentle smoulder so central to his being he'd never placed it, never noticed the first candle-spark that would built into the wildfire it is now, and it's only fair he be tested in ways he'd tested Hannibal. Love’s waited six years to emerge from denial. It can wait as long as it has to, for a full return.)

He doesn’t have to wait long for the next kill to pop up on Tattlecrime. Chiyoh sends him a link, two weeks after Hannibal left him alone in Turkey.

Jack Crawford’s horrified eyes stare into his soul through a golden mask; an alteration to the traditional Mask of Agamemnon he’d learned of after researching the Iliad a bit more in depth. The skin is a bright red around the edges, making Will wonder if it had been hot when Hannibal put it on him.

With a sigh, he shuts his eyes.

The pendulum swings, and he's in Hannibal's dining room, seated to Jack's right.

I serve lamb, because this is my offering. A sacrifice, one you asked for in half-truths, one you never offered me. I am taking him, this boundary and barrier between us, and I make it hurt just because I can. Because you will see it, and you will hurt too. I want you to hurt the way I do. I want to cut you open, but I can't see you dead, so I use our former life instead.

I cut his liver out while he's still alive, without anesthesia, and I feed it to him as he dies.

I accept my fear, Will, my anger and failings, my loss of control. I accept these as you've never accepted yours. I strangle him, and I pretend it's you.

I leave an offering on the table, so they know, under the tongue and beneath the eyelids.

Jack had your ear, so I took both of his. Those rest beside the lamb: my appetite cannot be satisfied by taboo consumption, anymore, not with the carnality you offered before tearing it away.

A knife rests in his back, and it has your name on it. The handle is made of willow; you've always been flexible, unpredictably so. The knife is in Jack as it is in me: a wound we share, done by you.

Will shivers, pressing into the image of Jack's face set in gold, the obolus coins for Freddie's keen eye, the intimacy in the entire display for him and him alone.

(Agamemnon, who sacrificed his daughter to the gods to appease Poseidon, who offended Achilles so greatly it took Patroclus dying to call him to action, who cared only about the ends rather than the means, who shouted and was bullheaded and didn't often listen. Yes, it fits, fits all too well.)

He wants to hold Hannibal, to press into his warmth, taste satisfaction in a softer way than before.

But there's one kill left. One Greek he knows will die.

Part of him – the old remnants of a discarded shell – wants to call ahead, tip them off, but he knows Hannibal won't forgive another betrayal. Jack and Alana were warnings, reminders, tying up loose ends. Hannibal's anger at them was shallow, superficial, towards the pig that will complete his sounder.

Will curls up in his bed alone, and lets the dogs sleep on his bed just the once. When he closes his eyes, he can pretend Hannibal's beside him. He needs that, right now.

"He's not going to give you a chance to take it all back," Abigail says, dressed in her death-day outfit stained in their blood. "He did that once, and you lied your way to our graves."

Will nods, once, quiet as he sips his whiskey and watches the dogs play.

"What are you going to do, when you see him?"

"I don't know," Will says.

"You want him."

"A part of me always has."

"You're being honest. With yourself, at least."

"First time for everything," he jokes.

She smiles, but it's pained.

"Maybe this reunion won't necessitate more pain."

"Other means of influence?"

"Chiyoh was right," Abigail says, tucking her braid over her shoulder, tugging at the ends of it the way he'd seen her do in Baltimore, a few times. "There are ways to influence him, other than lies and kitchens and betrayals. You don't have to kill him."

"I wanted to, once. I don't know that I could anymore."

"You could, the same way you could lie for three years, in a dollhouse, that you are normal. It would hurt, but you could do it. Self-destruction has always been one of your pathologies."

Will raises his glass to her mockingly, downing the rest of it in one sip.

It burns, but the way clarity does. He needs it, right now.

"He loves you," she whispers.

He nods, pensive.

"He spent three years waiting for you, Will. He's doing this for you, all of it, tearing you both apart so you can find yourself in his end."

"I didn't ask for it."

"You didn't need to. He offers it freely, but what do you want?"

"Forgiveness," he says.

It isn't a lie. He's stopped lying.

Abigail Hobbs gives him a parting smile, and he knows her specter won't return.

He finds it before Chiyoh sends it, and he can tell he’s not going to like it.

He’d expected the victim, but not the display: Molly’s cherubic cheeks paler than they’d ever been in life, all that pumping blood drained through the gouges in her chest where she’s impaled on antlers.

The Copycat’s first clue; the first thing Hannibal had ever done for him.

It’s beautiful. Will almost wishes it wasn’t, wishes it hurt to look, wishes he couldn’t see the love and devotion in every aspect of the display.

This isn’t a mockery, she is not stripped bare. This is the righting of wrongs, a bride in white bled at the altar to a false God: Will’s memorial, for his “heroic” deeds, his role in Hannibal’s death.

Her hair is carefully curled, lips and unworthy fingers stained with pomegranate juice as a beratement to Will, allowing things he ought to have not. Will hates the thought that she’s more beautiful in death than she’d ever been in life, but it lingers. She’s elevated, more than the boring domesticity he’d tried to kill himself with, more than the jokes he’d hated about his criminal mind, more than bad cooking and shitty sitcom reruns.

She is an offering and punishment: her throat cut in a way that makes him think of Abigail.

It is on purpose.

I take her last, because I want to savor it. I won’t consume her, because I want to know no part of her. She is my last message, my last pig, the last Greek between us and Troy. This is a test, Will. For you and for me.

I take her heart, and I leave it in a bowl of ashes. This is my heart, not broken, not bent and molded in contorted flesh. This is my heart, and the ashes you’ve left of it. It’s burning, and still I offer it to you, still I hunger for you, even as I hate myself for it.

I can’t stop, just as she can’t stop me. I take her tongue, for daring to taste you, and I delight in ripping the heart from her very chest. It is not surgical, too messy, too human, for the cold clinicality I once employed. I’m changed, in kills and humanity, and I can’t change back.

I want this to break you, I want to set your heart on fire and eat it whole. I watch the flames of this proxy heart burn, and try to divine the Fates’ plans for us, but I am no Oracle. I cut her throat so you see Abigail, I mount her on antlers so you see the man who broke your trust, I make it hurt so you know what I’ve always known.

Iphigenia, bled for Agamemnon's goals. Promised to Achilles, but they've blurred enough that it matters little. Her hands had touched both of them, unforgivably so to Hannibal, so no deer came to replace her as sacrifice.

No faked death saved her from this particular knife.

You can't love me, Will. You never have. You replaced me, and I will remind you why.

And he understands, as tears stream down his face, exactly what Hannibal is planning to offer Will next.

They say all roads lead to Rome.

At the birthplace of Rome's founder, Will concedes that point. It's past ten, late enough for the tourists and guides to have abandoned the excavation site and safer areas to wander, looking for signs of history in a world of endless change.

The rubble ruins are comforting, in a way, signs of the times. A broken cycle of destruction and creation, that Hannibal had mentioned in one of his many philosophically dense diatribes. Ouroboros, the endless cycle.

He wonders if there's creation to be found here in this place of endless ruin.

Will wanders the streets absentmindedly, lantern in hand, and he's reminded of the gates of Hannibal's childhood home, the flickering firefly lights leading him through the countryside towards his goal.

He feels the firefly pulses in his chest, now, shining the path home, to his home. To Hannibal, and all that entails.

(There's confliction in it, no one fact in his pulse because he's a being of mercury, toxic to the touch and ever shifting in form. A part of him will always want to kill Hannibal, just as much as he wants to kiss him.)

His heart knows the way even as he wonders, wandering past the Troys predating Achilles and Patroclus toward the one where his monster is waiting, always waiting. Chiyoh told him so, curt and disapproving over the phone.

He loves you to his end, she'd said, alongside a few choice words he understood the meaning of, if not the English equivalent. *And his death will be yours by my hands.*

Accepting yourself as a killer? He'd goaded like an asshole. She'd hung up on him, and he couldn't blame her for it.

But even if she hadn't, Will would feel it in the air like a trail of ozone after a lightning strike, like the first burst of blood with internal bleeding, like the first orgasm wrenched from a roughly-fisted dick, or the discordant rush of euphoria from a first kill. He would feel Hannibal like a phantom limb, like a siren call, drawing him closer.

He's never cared about the rocks he's risking, only that he's close enough to touch.

Will finds him in a roofless temple with Grecian architecture, the thick columns he's seen in DC and pictures in textbooks of ancient temples.

He thinks this place was once beautiful. A temple to the goddess of knowledge, rich with coin and company, marble statues and picturesque prayers. Sacrifices, when desired. Love, unconditional, worshipful love, when requested.

Now, it is ash and broken pillars, wreckage touching every piece of this deconsecrated memory. He wonders if Hannibal is here, among the rot, or in a time where life and light lived.

As Will's eyes close, the temple columns rise up around him – a forlorn resurrection of glory – and the roof the gods let drop pieces itself back together. He steps closer, picturing Hannibal in a white suit lighting candles, but the Norman Chapel does not appear.

Will moves through the temple, toward the hearth and the heart, his own burning in a way he could choke on. He steps past imagined statues to Athena, past the memorial of the Trojan War, past the *amphora* rumored to contain the blurred ashes of Achilles and Patroclus, knowing without knowing that Hannibal is before him.

His eyes open, and he's caught in rapture, at the gates of Hannibal's sanctum spying a crack. He presses forward, presses against a pale white door, and this time, *this time*, it finally opens.

Hannibal is silent, eyes tracing the bright lights in the sky, and Will sees the mess made in his foyer, the cracks in foundations and veneers, the bottomless pits that had once been holes, the sweet rot of decaying valentines.

Will feels like he can't breathe as he approaches Hannibal, chest flooded with warmth, the gentle suffocation of a warm blanket in a world of snow. His river runs red and Hannibal's foyer has devolved. They are blurred, completely and utterly. Minds linked despite better judgment, despite abstract ideas of self-preservation, despite betrayals in kitchens or snow fall, despite cliff dives and eroding bluffs.

They weren't lost to sea, the currents of the Atlantic didn't drown them. They're alive, and they're together at long last.

(It's here and the Uffizi Gallery, here and Baltimore, here and Quantico, here and Wolf Trap. They've lived so many lives, together and separate, and still, they find each other under starlight in the dark of night. Merged and conjoined – folie à deux – a madness shared by two.)

“I looked up at the night sky in Maryland,” Hannibal says, the low timbre felt in Will’s bones. “I saw Orion above the horizon, as you did traversing the ocean to find me. I saw Saturn, and her rings. Ursa Major and Minor. I wondered if we were seeing the same stars, or different ones.”

Will steps closer, examining his profile in the moonlight, the way it bends and contorts around his radiant form, highlighting the sharp jut of his cheekbones, the strands of silver in his hair. Hannibal looks like divinity, moon linings in his skin, and Will loves him, heart in his throat. Will loves him, stepping closer.

Will sits next to him, loving him, and chokes down the words, fingers pressing near enough to Hannibal’s to feel their radiant warmth.

“Some of our stars will always be the same. You told me that. They’re the same right now.”

Hannibal smiles at him indulgently, and Will wonders if he’d been smiling as he cut Molly’s heart from her chest, Jack’s liver from his abdomen, Alana’s brain from her skull. Hannibal hadn’t eaten their organs, despite the dietary desires after years without.

Will doesn’t know what that means yet.

(He doesn’t care to think what it says about him that the idea of not knowing Hannibal every possible way he can be known is more upsetting than the sounder victims that had once been friends, that had once been his wife.

Till death do us part, Will thinks in grim humor.

His reflective love for Molly, like his sheepskin morality, had drowned in the ocean’s waves. He doesn’t mourn it. There’s only room for two, in this world they’ve built, conquering Troy alone.)

Hannibal directs his gaze back to the stars, tracing the long line of bright bursts shaped in a meandering cross. Or a swan mid-flap, if Will squints.

“Cygnus,” Hannibal intones, something delicate in his voice that Will wants to cradle to his chest and keep safe. “The Swan constellation. Named after Cygnus, the lover of a son of Apollo named Phaethon. Accounts differ on the exact nature of their relationship, but it is universally accepted that in his grief, he showed enough love that the gods sought to spill it over the stars, to give other mortals something to look up at and aspire to.”

Hannibal looks at Will reverently, and love is set in the pores of his skin like something akin to religion. Will doesn’t look away, couldn’t even if he wanted to.

The enormity of desire – Hannibal’s, his, theirs – excites him.

“It is the constellation of friendship. And long-lost love. Not quite a million light years away, but close enough, I suppose, for us to not feel its light often.”

“I told you I love you,” Will says, not willing to look away from a shared sky and sea of stars quite yet.

“I told you that it was a reflection.”

“Of what?” Will asks, watching Hannibal’s mouth twitch in a frown, a tell he wouldn’t have seen if he wasn’t looking for it. Hannibal is uncomfortable, feeling vulnerable.

But they’re bared of knives here, in the ruins of that which their past parallel sought to conquer.

Will takes a breath and steels his nerve, gripping Hannibal’s hand with his own and squeezing gently as he asks, “Yours?”

Hannibal says nothing, and Will can’t help the smile stretching across his face, so wide it irritates the scar imparted on him by their dragon, and he couldn’t care less because Hannibal doesn’t move away.

It doesn’t feel real, Will’s hand on top of his, like everything in life has been forgiven and forgotten, scars scabbed over and porcelain fragments sealed together with prettied past and heartfelt hopes.

The warmth makes him hollow, flames of hope licking the empty cavern Will’s carved in him making a home.

His selfish, cruel, vicious boy.

“I reflected myself,” Will says when Hannibal doesn’t reply, sliding closer, too close, close enough that Hannibal can feel the entirety of Will’s side flushed against his, shoved together like puzzle pieces or matching fragments. Fitting, to think of them as glass or porcelain pieces: rubbing at each other’s edges until they fit together to their whims. “On the cliff, in the Uffizi Gallery, in the catacombs, in your kitchen, and in your dining room, and every night in your office. I was reflecting myself, for once, because I’ve never felt more in control and like myself than through your eyes and your love. When I killed–” Will pauses, face contorting in a grimace laced with anger. “When I killed Ulysses, your pet or toy or *whatever* , I felt like a lover scorned. It felt *right*, killing him. And sleeping with you afterwards, in his blood and at your crime scene, it felt too good to be right. I wanted to hate it, to hate myself, and I didn’t, and that’s the scariest thing in the world for me.”

“He was a killer,” Hannibal says, pulse in his throat, seeping blood and things with wings as an unforgiving bile spread through his chest and mouth, burning on contact. “It only makes sense that you–”

“I don’t care about the lives you end,” Will says, cupping Hannibal’s cheek with sparkling eyes he wants to cut out and throw somewhere they can’t *see* through him like a scalpel or needle or blade. “I learned that when I looked at Molly’s body, and could only see the beauty in it. It should have hurt, but it didn’t. She was another barrier, and I understand why you had

to kill her. I learned that when Alana's corpse didn't disturb me, and Jack's felt like benediction. I care about your life, Hannibal."

And Will's holding his hand like he matters, like he'd wash and wrap them in soft white bandages, like he'd press a kiss to them and to Hannibal.

Like he wants to be soft, for once.

Like they aren't solely creatures of violence caught in the vicious cycle of entropy and the mouth and tail of the serpentine circle they call eternity.

Like maybe, possibly, Will Graham can love him too.

"It makes sense for you to think so," Hannibal says softly, feeling Will's thumb stroke his hand and wanting to taste it on his tongue. "I've been your only companion since the Fall, with the exception of Chiyoh."

"This isn't Stockholm Syndrome," Will says gently. "Neither of us are prisoners."

"Not in the literal sense, no."

Will sighs, squeezing his hand.

"Bedelia said you were in love with me."

Hannibal looks down at their hands, Will's on top of his, and recalls the ephemeral eidolon he'd seen in the Norman Chapel, colored by bursts of stained-glass sunlight. He wonders if his mouth will bleed, should his lips touch Will's skin. He wonders if it would taste like ashes – as most things have, since that night – or pomegranate offerings that feel like hope.

"Did she?" he asks with a dry mouth, a heavy heart, unable to meet Will's piercing gaze.

He's picturing snow-globe domesticity once more: frozen lies in the dead of winter, landscapes of white where nothing and everything matters away from the world.

Will scoffs, giving a little laugh that seems mostly directed at himself. He tugs on Hannibal's hands, placing them at his shoulder and waist the way they'd been before the fall, desperately fisted in fabrics and blood. But there is no blood here, the only warmth is Will's, in body and in the painful waves of it he inspires in Hannibal's heart.

Will presses his forehead to Hannibal's, hands cupping his face so he can't look away.

"I ache for you, okay? I fucking *throb* and spasm for you, I crave you like a I crave whiskey late at night, and I hunger for you like nothing else. Don't tell me I don't when I've finally figured it out. She asked me the day I broke you out if I ached, and that's all I've done since meeting you. I find nourishment in your fucking existence, in your stupid smiles and fussy table arrangements, in the way you look at me like I'm something to be worshiped, and the way you hum operas when you think I'm not listening.

I love you," Will continues, nearly rambling, "and it doesn't matter if you think I don't because I fucking do. I'll love you silently or loudly, but I can't shut it off anymore than you can shut yours off. Even if you've never said the words, I can feel them. I can feel them pounding in your heart as though it were my own."

Will moves one of Hannibal's hands to his chest, the heat felt through a cotton-thin t-shirt Hannibal never would've bought him, and all he can smell is that god-awful aftershave, his shampoo, and the dogs.

(He's missed it more than he's willing to admit.)

Will's heart is racing, under his touch.

Will's eyes are warm, staring into his.

Will's lips are wet, and he's looking at Hannibal like he loves him.

"Paris was the one to kill Achilles, in the end," Hannibal murmurs, eyes closed as he presses into Will. "Guided by Apollo's hand, even Athena's guidance hadn't halted that fate. Achilles had been dipped in the River Styx as a boy, made invulnerable by circumstances and trauma, with only one spot of mortality in his heel."

He can feel Will's eyes on him, the cloying worry mixed with affection, but he has to get this out, has to offer this once more, to be sure.

To be certain.

Even if it hurts.

"When Patroclus died, Achilles went mad with grief. He desecrated the corpse of Patroclus' killer and sought his own end on the battlefield. He didn't find it until he approached the city gates, before the Trojan Horse was constructed, in Paris' unyielding aim, and Apollo's disfavor."

Hannibal takes both of Will's hands into his own, squeezing them gently before setting them aside.

He releases the first few buttons of his maroon dress shirt, letting enough of his skin show so that his heart can be bared and seen and left to Will's decisions, fate left in Will's hands once more.

He hands Will a knife, and it's one they've both bled for.

The linoleum knife he'd used as severance, before. What was supposed to be freedom, relinquishing the futility in his compassion. It had only wound them together more closely, red strings of fate made of blood, webbing them tight until there was no possibility of neat separation ever again.

"There is no Apollo to guide your hand," Hannibal says, eyes wet and lidded, watching Will's hands through the blur. "No gods to tell you right and wrong. But I've long known the only

guidance you need is that of your wondrous mind. For all my knowledge and intrusion, all my emotions and projections and manipulations, I've never been able to predict you with any certainty. I am flesh and bone, no demigod, but I offer you the closest equivalent: my heart, still beating in my chest. My Achilles' heel, the one gifted to me by you and your sought after change."

The knife is in Will's hand like forgiveness among the dead, and Hannibal lets himself smile at the thought of Will's hands slick with his blood, a taint that will always linger no matter where he goes.

There's a moment where he feels the sharp chill of the knife press over his pounding heart, and can feel the furrow of Will's forehead against his own. He feels it, and wonders if it will be quick, tolerant, or the long-drawn delights of a murder with foreplay. He's not sure which he'd prefer, only that he hopes he goes with the knowledge of what Will Graham's hand feels like, squeezing his heart.

Hannibal breathes against him, conscious of every exchange of air they offer in the caesura between them. He feels Will in such a visceral way, that he thinks his death will be worth it, for this final moment of unity.

Like the bluff, without the Dragon's officiation.

Will takes a shaky breath, metal point against Hannibal's chest, and says,

"All Greeks are dead."

Hannibal opens his eyes, and sees Will looking at him imploringly.

"Yes."

"You killed them to try and push me away, but Hannibal, I'm not fucking leaving. If you stab me, I'll stab you back. If you try to cut me out and leave, I'll rip your skin off with my teeth and leave you locked in a cage for me alone to appreciate. There is no separation anymore. I won't allow it."

Starving, Hannibal's hand reaches, and Will's own meets him halfway. Their fingers intertwine for the first time, an intimacy hitherto unexplored, and Hannibal's heart gives a now familiar thud.

It is not something that happens to him. It is felt.

Everything about Will is felt, crossing that liminal space of happenstance and sensation like light from the past offered by dying stars. Their deaths, the supernova they'd made in their collision, have led to this eventuality, this future.

Heart full, warmed to from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, Hannibal allows himself a moment of nostalgia, feeling his Memory Palace offer him the dreamt words easily, no longer mere fantasy.

“All light we receive is from the past,” Hannibal murmurs. “Crossing over space and time to allow for life. Dying stars send us spare parts, but they died out long ago.”

“Light is life,” Will echoes, “but this is the afterlife and we’re creatures of the dark.”

Will casts the blade aside and tackles Hannibal off the marble. There’s a feather-light kiss pressed to his heart, at the sole bead of blood the knife had extracted, before Will looks at him with an indescribable longing no composition or drawing could ever capture fully.

There’s something of worship to it, an elevation death would never have offered him.

“We’re conjoined,” Will whispers against the shaking pulse of his throat. It sounds like a promise.

And then he presses his lips to Hannibal’s, and Hannibal is helpless to do anything but return it. The gentle glide of lips against lips, mouths against mouths, is a softness Hannibal’s never experienced. Contextualized by love, by love returned, as he presses himself up into Will, twining their limbs together like mycelial roots or marriage trees, and kisses and lets himself be kissed without the need for more.

He could do nothing more than kiss Will Graham for the rest of his life, and he’d be euphoric. A marriage of minds is what he’d sought, before betrayal clouded his senses and humanity gnawed at him. This, any measure of this, is more than he’d ever planned to have.

The pressing intent of *more* when Will’s tongue slips past the barriers of teeth to taste would bring him to his knees, were he not already on the ground. The taste of whiskey prevalent, the scent of his own cologne overwhelming when he’s aware enough to realize it.

“You smell like me,” he says, brushing lips along the scent, the glide of lips and nose across Will’s jaw and neck.

“I’m yours.”

“I won’t wear your aftershave.”

“No,” Will says, smiling down at him. “You will wear my marks.”

“Stitched in smiles, or forgiveness?”

“I only crave your blood as wine, your life as mine.”

“Freely offered?”

“Willing,” is the reply he gets, Will’s teeth clamping down on his neck, offering the wet suction required to leave a bruise. He leaves another, on Hannibal’s clavicle, trailing marks over the slope of Hannibal’s neck and shoulders, tasting him and sampling him the way Hannibal had taught him to sample all delicacies.

He threads his fingers in the silky curls Botticelli would weep for, and pulls Will closer, scenting the two of them in the mingling scents his beloved wears, in the air between them,

as they taste and are tasted in turn.

It's soothing, this gentleness, not for the lack of violence but because of it. They are violence, it runs in their blood and bones as all wicked things do, and he'd never wish it different. That does not leave them without their softer parts, the unprotected belly beneath a shell of forts and bricks and barred doors.

It's a gift, intimate and vulnerable.

Hannibal won't waste it.

Will strips them both of clothing as he sits astride Hannibal's thighs like a conquering demigod taking the throne, clenching around him so sweetly with the strength in his thighs and the hardness he can see and feel, however teasing the feeling is. Hannibal lets Will do this, stripped of his dressing shirt and pants, shoes cast aside and left bare in the temple of Athena. A willing sacrifice, to all appearances, but his Will's mercy has come in a new form.

It isn't until Will's hands slide over the ridged scars of the Muskrat Farm brand that he pauses, that his eyes open, and anger floods him in tangible waves. Will lifts himself off of Hannibal, turns him over, and gasps at what he sees.

Evidently, Chiyoh had seen fit to avoid the knowledge, and Alana never informed him of it in the years of separation. Fingers shake, where they touch him. Burning like a new brand, this one much more welcome.

"He branded you," Will hisses, his vicious beast he can't help loving.

"Like a pig. I can see the irony, of course, but my appreciation of it is rather limited in the circumstances."

"I'd kill him if Margot hadn't."

"For touching me or marking me?"

"Both, I'd say," Will murmurs, pressing a kiss to the marks. They could've healed neater, had Hannibal been in a state to care about such things in the aftermath of Will's rejection. It hadn't been treated until they booked him, and noticed the inflamed tissue at risk of infection he'd never betrayed by grimace or sign of pain. He could have told them, on the drive to his prison, or any time before that, in Wolf Trap, but he'd wanted to remember the time, to have it stain his skin as it stained his mind, to have the mental anguish manifest in a physicality entirely of his control and subject to his purview.

"Do you wish it was yours?" he asks, and wishes he could see the expression play out across Will's face like the flickering flame of holy candles in catacombs, twisting around the darkness.

Will's breath hitches, arousal spiking in scent and sensation, and Hannibal smiles.

The knife isn't far, in reach, and he offers it to Will easily.

“I’ve thought of it as yours, in the bars of your rejection, treated to Alana’s mercy. It’s only fitting that it manifests in a more visible way. Much like the proxy scars left to me by Matthew Brown.”

Will hesitates, when Hannibal looks at him, eyes guilty as they eye the knife.

“I desire it,” Hannibal says, “if you do as well.”

“You already bear my mark,” Will states carefully, arm reaching around to hug Hannibal’s waist, tracing the wound they’d both made in his flesh.

Hannibal hums.

“I don’t ask this of you to be self-destructive, I ask because I know you wish it so, and because I’m always pleased to mark and be marked.”

“Reciprocity?”

“Always and forever, an ouroboros we can both indulge in.”

“Your hedonism is contagious,” Will murmurs against his shoulder, kissing the slope of his neck in a way that makes him shiver. “But I find myself as possessive of you as you are of me.”

“I don’t mind.”

The lips smile against his skin.

“You never have.”

It doesn’t hurt, the bits of flesh Will cuts from his back. The characteristics of the brand that are intolerably another’s mark, the etching of the pig, the stationary letters marking him as property of Mason Verger’s hateful farm. These are the things Will removes with a duality only he could pull off – kindness by knife, love by blood.

In a way, it feels like a baptism, washed in wounds and blood and forgiveness that doesn’t ache. The love and light of this being he adores, falling down on him in their new life. The Atlantic Ocean spat them out, embittered and resentful, cold and cruel, but the viscera has been scraped from their skin and scars, the screaming roar of blood and pain quieted, the taste of copper flooding his throat no longer unpleasant.

Will kisses the trails of weeping blood, lapping at the wounds with a careful focus and the bits of flesh cradled in his hands.

When he’s satisfied, he lays their jackets down, and lays Hannibal back against them. It’s a taboo he’s never engaged in, eating his own flesh, but he does not protest when Will lifts a scrape to his lips. He accepts it readily, delighting in the intimacy as he sucks Will’s fingers clean of his blood. Hannibal takes a piece of himself from Will’s cradled hands, and feeds it to his beloved just as gently.

When he swallows, Hannibal surges up, eager to taste it between them, and Will is all too happy to indulge him in this.

He tastes delicious, curated and clean after a lifetime of careful attention. The texture isn't off-putting the way he might have speculated, it adds character. Imbuing their kiss with meaning, as they are both consumed by the other's gravity, content by the knowledge that there is no escape, and that they don't *want* an escape anymore.

"I want you to fuck me," Will says between their wet, bloody lips, panting together as Will rocks back against him, teasing and prodding and poking as he always has and always will.

"Anything for you, darling."

Will had, evidently, taken the steps to prepare himself. He can feel it in the give of his ass, the way he can easily slide two fingers in and out with minimal resistance.

"Hannibal," Will near whines, astride his lap and cock beginning to leak precome on his chest. "Please."

He doesn't need to make Will beg, he has a lifetime to do that.

As he sheathes himself in the tight heat of his beloved's body, there's an acute feeling unlike any known to him. Something he can only describe as home, as the light of Hestia's hearth, the warmth of love requited and the end of snow and wintery ruin.

"I love you," Will says as he rides him, slow and sweet enough to burn them both inside and out with pleasure. "I love you."

Hannibal's eyes are watery, skin and brain spiraling with the overwhelming reality of knowing and being known and tasting and being tasted, at the rightness, in two becoming one. He can't speak the words, can't murmur anything, the wetness of a thousand things at the back of his throat. He can't speak them, but he says it every other way, with every delicate brush of lips, every tug of Will's cock as he brings them both to completion, every adoring look he offers this man that's changed his world so completely. It's no different from years past, the knowledge communicated in everything but words.

He comes in a flash of black, the glow of the moon and the shining sweat of Will's skin, a lighthouse he follows as he comes down. Will's release marks him, spilled over his chest and face, and he smiles.

Will slides off his lap, both soft and warm, and takes Hannibal's hands in his.

When he kisses their hands, his lips bleed, and Hannibal lets himself feel the enormity of life and love through Will's eyes, in the ruins of Troy.

"We've conquered Troy alone," he speaks into the skin of Will's shoulder.

"There will be more Troys, Hannibal. And we'll conquer them too."

A covenant sworn by blood in the moonlight, something Hannibal knows to be true with a conviction akin to love and religion and every other thing Will alone has made him feel

“I struggled, for so long, with naming my feelings for you. Friendship felt inadequate, love too trite, hate impossible.”

“What did you settle on?” Hannibal asks, watching Will through lidded eyes, sleepy and content with their twined limbs and inseparability.

“Hiraeth,” Will murmurs. “A longing to be where your spirit lives.”

(The screaming river finds peace winding through Ancient Troy, and Hannibal’s Memory Palace grows and shifts, in the styling of the Temple of Athena, where hope once freed returned to him in the form of love).

CODA I: BLUEBEARD’S WIFE

BEDELIA DU MAURIER hadn’t run, when Alana Bloom, Jack Crawford, and Molly Foster (once Graham) turned up dead. She wasn’t quite so foolish as to believe she’d outrun Hannibal, that anywhere in the world would be safe from his tender torture, should he choose to direct it at her. While not a strict believer in fatalism, she’s well aware of Hannibal’s agency in this world, having seen it first hand across Europe as his plaything and affair, his psychiatrist and his distraction from heartbreak. Having spoken with the manifestation of it, the culmination of Hannibal’s humanity and vulnerability wrapped in a mortal coil.

Bedelia’s lips curl dismissively at the thought, at Will’s mocking remarks about menus and her status on them. The *you’d have it coming* because she dared to touch that which he’d not yet accepted. Accepted the ring, and the various strings attached to it, played willing captive, curious beyond self-preservation on who an unveiled Hannibal would become.

Admittedly, she’d grown careless in Florence, reckless, even. Hannibal’s instability fed by Will’s, feeding her own. Prey wary of predators, folding in on herself to garner some semblance of sedation, eating vegetarian to avoid the unsavory memories associated with Hannibal’s preferred meat. She’d fucked him, a few times in Paris, once in Florence, but the moment Will Graham’s air tangled with his, he remembered his preferences, the hunger Bedelia had never quite satiated, no matter how long they went or how vocal he was.

There is an undercurrent of jealousy in her distaste for Will Graham – not quite hatred, but far from a realm of tolerance – a jealousy not entirely separate from fear.

Hannibal’s influence on her had not been quite so overpowering, nor intoxicating. There had been the rush of power she’d read of in graduate school, the firsthand accounts from killers

and the therapists that had treated them, but horror preceded it. Panic, disgust, a small hint of bitterness that she'd taken part in something so savage as murder, so banal as killing a patient. Their patient. Will Graham's person suit was much less tailored than her own, stitches and seams loose and baggy, stuffed full of lies and a fake life. She'd indulged herself in her cool remarks, barbs passed back and forth between sips of wine.

Her conflicting feelings regarding Hannibal's love for Will hadn't mattered when it came to the knowledge's impact on Will, the delight she'd obtained when he appeared shaken, mournful. Riddled with regrets for what had been and what could no longer be.

You'd have it coming, Will had said, buttoning up the suit jacket in a fine cut that Hannibal might have selected, were he in a position to do so. A tailored suit for a tailored monster: the borders between lie and reality thinning the closer to reunion he and Hannibal ventured.

Bedelia concedes the point. Perhaps she would.

She has a box full of recipe cards she'd never thrown out, after all, the willing victim who traded the autonomy of point-blank distance and lead bullets for the unpredictability of his embrace.

(Unlike Will, she hadn't been gutted, but only because she hadn't mattered enough to be considered a betrayer to Hannibal's betrayed. Love is not a creature of control, but some part of Hannibal's near-indifference will always sting, the keen white pain of a papercut, or perhaps several, littering her skin.)

As she sips her wine at the kitchen counter, heels off and hair loose in natural curls, she can feel him. Not physically, not literally.

The pinprick warning of predators, when the prey scents danger.

"Bedelia," Hannibal greets warmly, dressed in white like a bride on her wedding day. It's the closest version of the Hannibal she'd treated in Baltimore, stitched together neatly behind that veil, but changed. Altered by circumstance and social environment: the lone gravity of one man. "It's good to see you again."

"Is it?" she asks curiously, sipping the wine without fear.

"It's always good to see old friends."

Bedelia closes her eyes briefly, forcing a breath in and out before stilling entirely, aware of another presence at her backdoor; the sound of the sliding screen subtle but pounding like her heart in her chest.

Hannibal had been alone, when the other deaths had occurred. It lacked the distinct brutalization his partner would prefer, lacked the escalation elements she'd imagine present at their scenes, if Francis Dolarhyde had been an indication.

Will Graham.

A part of her had hoped he was dead. Oh well. He had warned her, after all.

Perhaps she should have listened, foolish attempts at flight or not.

“Is that what we are?” Bedelia ponders, unable to resist the remark knowing Will’s listening in.

She wonders if his denial has cleared, if he’s found his appetite and satiated it to the hedonistic highs Hannibal would desire. She wonders if he thinks of his wife, or if he’d forgotten her the moment Hannibal left the context of a prison cell.

She might ask for curiosity’s satisfaction if nothing else. If she knows them (and she does know them), this will be a drawn out affair, the sadism of Hannibal and the extracted vengeance of Will. It will hurt, but there will be pleasure in it, for them if not for her.

The snail fed on flesh, only to be consumed herself.

It’s not a role she’d assign herself, but this has, indubiously, never been about her. She’s to be a sacrifice to their courtship. This does not mean she will be a willing one.

When Hannibal looks at her curiously, she smiles with thin lips.

“We’ve both consumed willing flesh before, and been consumed in turn.”

“Our consumption was a means to an end,” Hannibal says sedately, amusement dancing in the liquid amber of his eyes.

Bedelia can taste the anger like clouds of ash falling over her, and she indulges the impulse to crush.

“An enjoyable one, for a time. Have you come seeking a temporary distraction once more?”

Daring to move closer, she drags a finger along the well-tailored seams of his suit, over the broad shoulders she’d clutched while fucking him and being fucked in turn. Her preference had fallen towards the temporary control and dominance of being penetrator – not unlike observance – but she’d found her pleasure in both roles.

Hannibal Lecter, for all his faults and pathologies, is a gentleman. And he never comes first.

A smile pulls at the fullness of his lips, a broadening expression as he looks down at her with amusement and behind her with joy, with appreciation, devotion – the likes of which her visage had never inspired. It’s another slip of ice in her chest, but hearing the violent rumble of animalistic instability behind her soothes it.

Bedelia takes pleasure in rattling Will Graham, in savoring the last bit of rebellion and agency life and Hannibal will see fit to afford her. There is a distinct taste of victory, as she drags the squirming monster she’d seen hiding in the linings of his skin behind a veil of pretend family to the forefront; a therapy two-fold, for her and Hannibal’s more violent half.

There’s a prick at her neck, the chill of drugs slipping into her bloodstream. It isn’t mercy, as she collapses into Hannibal’s arms, Will Graham reflected in the depths of her once-lover’s eyes. Evolution's warnings aren’t effective, it would seem.

She'd always had a feeling curiosity would do her in, and wonders what limbs will be left as she slips away.

She does not allow her surprise to show, when she wakes to a sky full of darkness and the subtle sounds of Hannibal cooking. The hot sparks of oil in pans, the low notes of operatic tones, the hum of her oven, the faint sprinkle of spices falling on a food she's hesitant to discover the origin of.

Bedelia stills herself, forcing the calmness to not betray her consciousness, but a derisive snort declares the act pointless.

She wonders what they'd given her.

It doesn't feel like opiates.

"I'm no fool, Bedelia," Will Graham says, seated at the head of the table with a glass of wine she'd been saving. *Chateau Lafite's 1869* vintage, one gifted to her by Hannibal near the beginning of their appointments.

As she blinks away the cloudy remnants of drugged unconsciousness from her eyes, he smirks, and doesn't offer her a glass.

"One could argue differently."

"One could," he agrees, near mockingly, "but you had warning."

"Had you wished me to act on the threat of menus and acquired ingredients?

Will's teeth are sharp, as he bares them at her. Uncaged and unleashed, it would seem. She's tempted to ask if he bites Hannibal, or if that's a layer of infernal intimacy he hasn't yet traversed.

"The chase is part of the pleasure, when it comes to taking your meals from the land's supplies."

"The thrill of ancient tradition. Hunting and gathering, with little concern for ethics."

Will scoffs.

"Is it ethical, for a psychiatrist to be fucking their patient?"

Bedelia simpers, lips dripping condescension without needing to utter a word. She's rewarded by the whitening of fingers around the stem of her wine glass, the larger sip of her stolen fruits.

“I’d return the question to you, but that would be presumptuous. Physical intimacy was… *absent* from mention, during our appointments, and from what I was informed of in my time behind the veil.”

“Sex alone isn’t *intimacy*,” Will hisses.

“Not alone,” Bedelia assents, still pleased. “But it can act as a vessel for other desires, a merging point upon which intimacy can be built. Did you participate in his intimacy, or did you opt for observation?”

“This isn’t therapy.”

“If it were, I’d refer you.”

“Observation is all you were equipped to offer him.”

“At times. My consumption was not willing in the same way, and manifested differently than your own. We’ve both been his bride.”

Will composes himself once more, and it’s fascinating to watch his monstrous truth contort back into some semblance of a person in control rather than a beast chasing pleasure.

“But I am to be the last. How… *unfortunate* for your future prospects.”

“Has your ache subsided,” Bedelia prods, “or has nourishment escaped once more?”

“We find nourishment in each other,” he replies, lips wet with wine and eyes sparkling with malice and sharp things she should fear, “and yes, we’ve fucked if you’re so goddamn curious. He finds me more than satisfactory.”

“An eternal satisfaction, or the interim before displeasure?”

He glares at her, and it’s then she takes stock in her limbs, in the own ache Hannibal carved in her, *of her*, and sutured neatly.

Her leg is gone, and she becomes acutely aware of what the scent in the kitchen really is. As she allows herself a calming breath before Will’s penetrating gaze, the dress comes to her attention. The fitted dress with a plunging neckline cut in swaths of glittering black she’d thought looked like stars, when she acquired it.

There is an abstract horror to it, to her fate, but she cements herself in what her eyes can see, the residual influence she can offer to the two patients she’s helped and hindered interchangeably.

“Did he dress me, or did you?” she wonders aloud.

She can tell it’s the right button to push when Will’s lip curls, and Hannibal sweeps into the room with a platter she doesn’t wish to see.

“I promise I was a gentleman,” Hannibal says with a smile, dropping a thoughtless kiss to the crown of Will’s head when he lowers her leg to the dining room table. Bedelia tracks the flush of heat that appears, from neck to cheek, as Will looks at Hannibal with an uncomfortable level of love requited, devotion returned.

As they’re distracted by each other, she slips a sharp tined fork into her palm, concealed by the folds of her dress. A precaution, should Will approach. Entertainment, if nothing else. With both here, it’s unlikely she’d escape, but there’s a futile pride urging her to try.

It’s beautiful, in a horrible, self-aware way. He does not present the leg as anything but what it is, does not masquerade it under the moniker of some other animal. It is hers, painfully hers, wrapped in leaves and topped with sweet fruits, on a platter of roses and pomegranates, colorfully arranged like a work of art and so clearly an offering to Will she’d dare to call it blunt.

Inelegant, for all the ostentatious presentation.

“Pit-roasted leg made kalua style, and wrapped in ti leaves over a bed of coals. Admittedly, I didn’t add a terrible amount of spice. Better to let your flavor speak for itself.”

Hannibal, at least, is polite enough to slide her a glass of wine, with a glance down at her dress to let her know exactly what she's concealing.

She smiles half-heartedly, sipping her wine and hoping it numbs the faint pulse of her leg's absence.

“Still concerned with how I taste?”

Hannibal gives a crooked smile, the one that had charmed half of Europe on their whirlwind tour, and he doesn’t comment.

“Purely for your *meat,*" Will is quick to interject. "Your parts aren’t needed.”

“Do you rejoice in my misfortune, as Plato thought?”

Will’s glare wrinkles his brows, carved cruelty shining through his pores at her careful words.

“There is no envy present.”

“You don’t deny the jealousy. Is it because I sat at his table willingly or the hold I once held in his bed and mind?”

“Your influence pales in contrast, and it’s long died out Bedelia,” Will says cruelly, maintaining eye contact when he takes a careful cut of her leg and places it in his mouth. He chews slowly, aware of Hannibal’s heady gaze on him she’s certain, and he delights in the flinch she is unable to fully conceal as he swallows. “Your purpose is best served as entertainment and livestock. I did tell you.”

“Do I have it coming?”

“Did Paolo, when his brother sent him and Francesa to Hell?”

“Arguably,” Bedelia murmurs,” “murder is the worse crime by the rules of the inferno, than the taking of willing flesh, marked or other.”

“Not in my eyes,” Will says.

Later, Will provokes her, near enough for her arm to shoot out in some foolish attempt at self-defense, a futile effort to regain control.

The sharp points never enter Will, caught by Hannibal’s quick arm, but she sees the sharpness of her fate in their mutually exchanged madness. Curiosity, for all it’s brought her, had never quite been worth this.

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Hannibal smiles on, later, as Will cuts her hands from her body and her tongue from her mouth, muffling her screams with his hand and her blood.

Her existence fades away in the gentle roll of clouds, blood seeping from her body without pause as he drags the knife across her breasts and stained dress, over the slim slope of her neck, and the contours of her face.

She bleeds in rivers, and Hannibal watches with a smile, and she wishes she’d killed them both when she had the chance.

Misplaced affection and self-destructive curiosity, or not.

CODA II: BREAKING OUROBOROS

Hannibal and Will are both early risers, one by preference the other a result of circumstances. Will told him it’s a mix of routine from days as a beat cop, and frequent early mornings when bodies dropped and Jack Crawford came to fetch him.

Hannibal wakes first, this particular morning, with a mind full of half-grasped memories and delight. Bedelia’s death, the way Will had looked in a fitted suit, the entertainment Freddie

Lounds offered with her website…for the first time in many years, Hannibal has nothing but joy, nothing but love, pervading his being.

He smiles, presses a kiss to the mark he'd left Will on his forehead – bonesaw regrets, never forgotten, eventually forgiven – and leaves the bed as quietly as he can. The dogs wag their tail eagerly as he descends the stairs, tongues out as they pant and pad towards him.

Kaiyo licks his hand, when he reaches down to pet her, and he feels love course through him once more.

He loves them as the extension of Will they are, resentment dried up and left for prior times. Even when they shed all over his furniture or tear apart his antique silk Bergère chairs with their relentless need for affection, and curiosity about scents.

He lets them into the backyard after feeding them, knowing they'll not wander far from the grass.

Feeling nostalgic, Hannibal opens the cupboard. There's a particular tea blend Chiyoh had acquired for him, one from their time with Aunt Murasaki, and he craves the warmth of a single cup of it.

He doesn't have a concrete image in his mind, as it opens, no picture of what mug he'll use – teacups aren't often bought, kept high on the shelves like priceless things beyond touch, still an abrasive wound without the time required to heal. Hannibal has no expectations, but when he opens the cupboard, he's left floundering.

He opens the cupboard, and he sees the same porcelain teacup with blue, floral swirls Will had broken months ago. The one he'd gathered into shaking hands, while Hannibal ached and tried to pretend he didn't.

Trembling, Hannibal picks the teacup up by its ear, watching the gold ribbons scattered throughout it glint in the narrow cascade of sunlight filtered through the kitchen window.

It is changed by the fall, the impact, the trauma of landing with no promise of safety, but it is not broken. It is not ugly.

Much like love, the Fall and repair have only made the cup *more,* the gold ribbons an esoteric reminder of scars and yearning. His love has elevated him in a way his violence could not completely, and his love returned has made him divine.

The teacup is not the same, but wishing for sameness in an existential cycle of change and shifts in circumstance is a fool's errand. It won't bring Abigail back, won't bring Mischa back, but people aren't quite teacups. Pain isn't quite subject to the whims of entropy.

Will finds him a few minutes later, stirred by the dogs' playful barking, probably, and Hannibal's still cradling the teacup in his hands, holding it to his chest, inexplicably, undeniably touched by God.

“What’s wrong?” Will asks, worried when Hannibal doesn’t immediately turn to look at him. Hannibal feels the touch on his shoulder, the known warmth of it, and he can’t stop the love from filling him, flooding him, overwhelming.

When Hannibal turns to look at Will, taking him in, he thinks of all they’ve shared, all they’ve rebuilt, the gaps between them Abigail had once owned, filled by each other, by forgiveness.

It’s the glint of Italian sunlight, and he thinks about buying Will a ring.

“I love you,” he says, and it’s the easiest thing in the world to say, the confession to a deity he’ll always worship, the admission of what’s lingered in him for years and years, the antiquity of eternity, stretching backwards and forwards in time, because he’s loved Will Graham forever, and this is the first time he’s said a thing plainly, free of metaphor.

Will’s smile stretches across his whole face, blinding and wonderful, and everything he’s ever wanted. Will doesn’t hesitate, decisive in his love, fisting his fingers in the fabric of Hannibal’s dressing gown before crushing their mouths together.

Hannibal leaves the teacup on the kitchen counter, shining in sunlight, and he kisses the man he loves with an enormity beyond all else. His reason for being, his wicked thing, his cunning boy, his Will.

Just his.

As they break for air, Hannibal pushes their foreheads together, fingers tracing the scars they’ve left each other with reverence, feeling the faint rise of the bonesaw scar he’d left while starving, hearing the dogs play in this house they’ve made a home on the steps of Troy: evidence of a love that transcends hunger.

He looks at Will in sunlight, shining with adoration, and knows this is eternal. Knows that they are both nourished and burning eternally, a spark the ocean couldn’t kill. Whole, and together, and in love.

“It’s beautiful,” Hannibal echoes, filling the cracks cliffside mercy had left in him with gold.

The sparkle in Will’s eyes tells him that he thinks so too.

End Notes

CWs (spoilers)
-Fucking near a corpse, while being aroused by the murder of said corpse.
-Sex at a crime scene, near two corpses, but the corpses aren't the turn on, killing them was, and shut up stop judging mee I'm not the one who did it.
-Materialization of Dante's bullshit, several times.
-Major show character deaths (not Hannibal or Will).

Note about inspiration/references:
-Greek Myths.
-Chinese medicine.
-Philosophy, specifically Nihilism and Existentialism, as well as Epicurean thoughts and different perspectives on suicide, salvation, and love.
-Pablo Neruda and Richard Siken's prose seeped into my writing in some areas, and I use a few of their turns of phrase in different places (never-blooming flowers, killing floor of love, etc).
-Biblical verses have been bastardized and stripped for parts in some strands of dialogue, and I interpreted the Fall to parallel the Fall of man, aka Adam and Eve's descent into sin.
Alchemy and the interpretations of ouroboros came from several different cultures.
-Greek occultist practices of divination.
-Windigo lore from the Great Lakes.
-Dante's inferno, referenced copiously
-Psychology (one of my majors in Undergrad, and yes, the Freud hatred is my projections in writing).
-Thermodynamics Chemistry (my other major).
-Physics of time, entropy, astrophysics, Schrodinger's cat, etc (i love it, leave me alone).
-The ruins of Troy are in Turkey, along with a recreation of the Trojan Horse you can visit and what remains of the Temple of Athena.
-Anarbek Aydem - Hannibal's ID (means pomegranate master, bright or enlightened).
-Michael Avci - Will's (means “who is like God”/”gift from God”, hunter).
-1st dog is Cephy, short for Encephalities,
-2nd is Kaiyo, a Japanese name for forgiveness.

Explanation on Ulysses:
He has a condition called Stendhal syndrome that Hannibal coaxed into murder, because of course he did. This, paired with undiagnosed OCD, compels him to recreate the art to soothe/control the anxiety and almost panic he feels seeing it.

Trojan War Explanation (because I love discussing this shit):

-Hannibal is Achilles and Will is Patroclus, as was cast in the show. I think this is really fitting, because the downfall of them both (them being A & P AND H & W) can, in some ways, be blamed on Achilles'/Hannibal's pride. In myth, Achilles' refusal to fight with the Greeks due to Agamemnon's theft of Briseis (who was Achilles' concubine that some accounts and interpretations say he loved) was what led Patroclus to lead the charge without him, and that death led to his own. In the show, there is no Briseis, but Hannibal's wounded

pride and (in a way) broken heart in Mizumono is what really destroys the teacup. Jack's claim over Will (morally speaking, and loyalty-wise) and the ploy he allows Will to run with Hannibal divides them (Will and Hannibal), and it seals the "death" of that version of them. A Hannibal that trusted Will, and a Will that thought Hannibal would forgive him.

-Antony Dimmond, along with Tobias Budge, Randall Tier, and Francis Dolarhyde, all, in a way, represent Briseis in terms of their relation to Hannibal. They are all possibilities, potentials, for companionship. They are people who would be easier, perhaps, than Will. Each of them has some level of latent violence, malice, or manipulativeness that Hannibal appreciates, and with the exception of Dimmond (and I have questions on that) they are all killers. These are people Hannibal, perhaps, wishes he could want as a companion (sexual or other).

-Jack is, of course, Agamemnon. It is he who helped along the end result that was Mizumono, and his actions that hastened Hannibal's plans and led to the rush of the kitchen scene.

-Alana is Phoenix, a lesser known character who, essentially, tried to reconcile Achilles and Agamemnon. He is a wise man who advises Achilles aid them in the conquest of Troy. Alana, similarly, appealed to the better nature of people, and in season 02 she did act as a barrier between Hannibal and Jack that later turned to a line of communication, in season 3. Her display has the additional meaning of the mythical phoenix.

-Molly is Iphigenia, a promised bride of Achilles (my beta pointed out that Will and Hannibal are so merged, that wedding one was wedding both, so for symbolism it still fit), that Agamemnon sacrificed in pursuit of his goals. By this I mean, Jack knew full well what could happen when he came to Will's new life, and he proceeded with the knowledge that it could ruin it. Her sacrifice also paves the way to the Troy Hannibal and Will desire.

-Despite Cassandra technically being a Trojan, she is embodied by Chiyoh, who tries to warn Hannibal of the dangers of Will Graham and is, as the interlude says, unheeded.

-Ulysses is Odysseus, another "ally" of Achilles.

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